

LONG ISLAND

SNUG anti-gun violence message part of PBS tribute to MLK Jr.



Program coordinator Ta'Isha Gist, outreach worker Dalvin McKay, sitting, and senior outreach worker Tashawn Donaldson outside of the SNUG building on Straight Path in Wyandanch Saturday. Credit: Newsday / Steve Pfost

By Robert Brodsky

robert.brodsky@newsday.com [@BrodskyRobert](#)

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Ta'Isha Gist's story did not always seem destined for a happy ending.

Gist got caught up with gangs as a teen and was sent to a youth detention center at age 14 for three years. Another brush with the law at age 19 sent her to prison for eight years.

But Gist was determined not to become another statistic.

After her release, Gist, now 41, became an "outreach worker" for SNUG — guns, spelled backward — an anti-gun violence initiative in Hempstead. She was hired to mentor other young people heading down the wrong path, teaching them the skills to resolve conflicts nonviolently.

"No one wants to live in a place where their kids can't go outside or it's really dangerous," said Gist, now the supervisor of the Wyandanch SNUG program. "So when they see something is being done and you can trust the people doing it, then it gives the community hope."

'I'd be trying to survive'

SNUG's Street Outreach programs are based on the nationally known Cure Violence Health Model that was developed in Chicago in the 1990s.

The programs, run by local nonprofits but overseen by the state, targets youth, typically between the ages of 14 and 24, who are at high risk for gun violence.

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SNUG and its message of nonviolence will be highlighted Monday at 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. on PBS during a one-hour tribute to the life and legacy of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., airing statewide on PBS stations and streaming at empirestateplaza.ny.gov/nyking.

"If it wasn't for SNUG, I'd be trying to survive," said Gist, who was interviewed for the program. "That's the difference from living and actually being open to see opportunities that are in front of you. When you talk about Martin Luther King's promise — when you're exposed to a positive agenda, it can show you things you've never been able to see. It lifts some weight off your shoulders."

But getting people to put down the guns is only the first step, organizers said.

SNUG also hosts music and art programs, community basketball games, computer labs and job readiness programs to help give young people a path to self-sufficiency.



Hempstead SNUG program manager Latesha Fowler stands inside the program's computer room on Friday. Credit: Newsday / Steve Pfost

Latesha Fowler, program manager of Hempstead SNUG, said the program even helped mediate decades-old gang disputes in the village.

"Now they're not so hung on that type of mentality," said Fowler, who grew up in Hempstead and Freeport and previously served eight years in prison for gang assault. "You get different people from different areas being able to hang out with each other and

socialize in a productive manner. And that was something that historically took us a long time to overcome."

'Credible messengers'

SNUG's outreach workers, known as "credible messengers," live in the communities they serve and are often former gang members who spent time in prison. They receive a full-time salary, benefits and 40 hours of initial training.

"I tell them [youths] there are other routes you can take other than be a gangster or a tough guy," said Dalvin McCay, 24, of Huntington, a former Crips member who now works as an outreach worker in Wyandanch. "There are other routes you can take that are good for you."

Outreach workers target young people both in the streets on a day-to-day basis and also respond to community shootings, canvassing neighborhoods, stores and hospitals, hoping to provide peaceful solution to conflicts.

"My message is that there are better things outside than gangs and violence," said Tayshawn Donaldson, 28, of Wyandanch, an outreach worker and former gang member who lost a cousin to gun violence. "Go to school. Get your education. Go to college. There's a lot of fun things to do rather than getting into trouble, killing people and playing with guns."

SNUG operates in 12 cities across the state, including one each in Nassau and Suffolk counties. Both the [Wyandanch program](#), which is administered by the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk Inc., and [Hempstead](#), run by the Mineola-based Family & Children's Association, began in 2015.

The other programs are in Albany, the Bronx, Buffalo, Mount Vernon, Newburgh, Poughkeepsie, Rochester, Syracuse, Troy and Yonkers.

SNUG is funded by the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, which also provides training and administrative oversight to the program.

"We really want to say, 'You can solve issues by doing something other than picking up a gun,'" said Damon Bacote, deputy commissioner of the Division of Criminal Justice Service. Bacote oversees the agency's Office of Youth Justice, which has oversight of all SNUG programs.

"And, because our people are from the community and have been involved in gangs and violence themselves, they have a pulse on who these young people are," he added.

Bacote, a former social worker, started the Mount Vernon SNUG program in 2014, later becoming a state training director. He said SNUG is the personification of King's mission of peace and unification through nonviolence.

"When you talk about hopes and dreams, and helping people aspire to be their full selves and find their full potential," Bacote said. "I think SNUG is an excellent place to tie in some of Dr. King's dreams."



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robert.brodsky@newsday.com [@BrodskyRobert](#)

Robert Brodsky is a breaking news reporter who has worked at Newsday since 2011. He is a Queens College and American University alum.



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