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WORKING FOR A SAFER SPRING IN BROWNSVILLE

In an area where shootings and deaths are too common, a coalition has formed to draw attention to the problem, and find solutions. > *By Nekoro Gomes*

The last week of 2008 saw 10 shootings over seven days in Brownsville, five of them fatal. Shortly after the new year began, a 17-year-old girl from the area was gunned down at a party. Disgusted by the bloodshed, neighborhood activists are wasting no time in 2009 to organize against violence in northeast Brooklyn.

On a recent Saturday afternoon at P.S. 323 in Brownsville, several dozen community members joined with City Councilman Charles Barron, who represents the area, and his wife, state Assemblywoman Inez Barron (who recently replaced Assemblywoman Diane Gordon after she was convicted on bribery charges), to attend the first meeting of the Communities Against Violence Coalition.

"Our mission is to erase the level of violence that is happening in our backyard," Andre Mitchell, an activist and lifelong resident of both Brownsville and East New York, told the assembled. "Isn't that why we're all here?" he asked, as residents murmured in agreement.

Mitchell, 42, the founder and executive director of a local nonprofit organization called Man Up! Inc., took the lead in organizing his neighbors, in an effort they hope will bring attention to their neighborhoods' plight from the highest levels in Albany. The group is calling for Gov. David Paterson to come to Brownsville and experience the atmosphere they live in.

Mitchell recalls being inspired by a newscast around year's end. "I remember watching the news, and Mayor Bloomberg and [Police Commissioner] Ray Kelly were highlighting a drop in crime in various areas throughout the city." But that didn't match local reality. "One of the most important elements that they seemed to ignore was the community."

Now, it's important to try to change the area's atmosphere for recreation, rather than crime sprees, in the warmer weather. "What we're afraid of is there may be increased violence. Economically, it's a hard time right now," he said. "Our goal is to get more in front of the root causes of the problem, which is poverty."

Mitchell organized a "Less Bullets, More Books" rally in Brownsville on Jan. 3, as well as an "emergency summit" two weeks later to work with community members on ways to stop the violence. The new coalition, 20 groups strong, is part of an anti-violence initiative by Man Up! that seeks to build visibility and support for a community-wide response to violence among local churches, small businesses and the residents of the many NYCHA housing developments in the area.

Currently, Man Up! organizes six-person neighborhood patrols in Brownsville and East New York from a pool of 70 members. The effort is largely paid for by the nonprofit's members, who typically use their own cars for the patrols, says Mitchell.

So while residents and Man Up! Members brainstormed grassroots ways to expand their local efforts, they also showed an awareness of the state's budget process and the expected federal stimulus from Washington.

During the meeting, approximately \$462 was raised for members to attend the 38th annual legislative conference of the New York State Association of Black and Puerto Rican Legislators in Albany that kicks off on Feb. 13th. That should advance the coalition's major goal of raising the profile of the community's ills.

"The powers that be," said Mitchell, "need to pay more attention and look at [violence] as a crisis – like they do when other catastrophes or crises occur. We often have to argue for our fair share."

For his part, Councilman Barron pledged to "bring Brownsville and East New York to City Hall" – and both he and Assemblywoman Barron promised to try and bring Gov. Paterson to the neighborhood on behalf of the coalition.

"He needs to get here to Brownsville," Barron said, "at least to walk around and see what the Communities Against Violence Coalition is trying to do."

For Mitchell and other members of Man Up!, the cycle of violence in East New York and Brownsville is less related to the number of police that patrol the streets, as much as it is to being especially hard-hit by the city's downturn. In Brownsville and East New York, the rates of unemployment for the month ending in December of

last year stood at 16.9 and 11.8 percent respectively (compared to a citywide rate of 7.6 percent), according to the state Department of Labor.

And according to the most recent neighborhoods report by the Furman Center at NYU, in 2006 Brownsville had the 9th highest felony crime rate in the city, at 38.5 per 1,000 residents; East New York came in 17th with 28.6.

"We all know that Brownsville is overly due, that East New York is overly due, for any amount of stimuli coming our way," said Van Dyke Houses Tenant President Lisa Kenner during the meeting. "That's why we have so much violence in our community because a lot of men and women here do not have jobs."

- Nekoro Gomes