

Save Our Streets - Crown Heights Winners of the 2011 Martin Luther King, Jr. Peace Award

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Award was established by the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the nation's oldest interfaith peace and justice organization, in 1979 to recognize unheralded persons or groups working in the United States in the tradition of Rev. Dr. King. This year the award is presented to Save Our Streets (S.O.S.) Crown Heights (soscrownheights.org). S.O.S. is a grassroots organization engaged in brave and strategic work to encourage nonviolence and eradicate gun violence in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Operating from core beliefs in nonviolence as a way of life and the efficacy of community organizing to make change, S.O.S. has managed to curb gun violence in a neighborhood where, despite significant reductions in crime, shootings and killings remained far too common an occurrence.

While consistently carrying the message that, "Our community is putting the violence behind us," S.O.S. Crown Heights is multi-faceted in approach. The team utilizes community mobilization, public education, case management, faith-based organizing, and live conflict mediations to transform the norms around violence. They provide a 24/7 community watch to insure a constant, reliable presence. Lisa Jones, S.O.S. program director, works to connect with local stakeholders and service providers, as well as to track data. "I believe that we have to be the change that we want to create and I approach my work in the spirit of love and light," says Jones.

The organization's four outreach workers and "violence interrupters" walk the streets at night to engage with those who are most likely to shoot or to be shot, which includes stepping into the middle of gang fights to stop violence from escalating, and preventing retaliatory acts when gun violence occurs. In addition, each outreach worker carries a caseload of 15 youth to mentor, check-up on, and help to find jobs and educational opportunities.

"Saving Our Streets is equal to saving my family," says Marlon Peterson, a Violence Interrupter for the program. Most of the outreach workers were born and raised in Crown Heights and have empathy and compassion for those they seek to help because they were once, as outreach worker supervisor, Derick Scott, says, "product[s] of the disease of violence." But now, Scott continues, "I advocate for nonviolence with love, honor, and respect as my shield."

FOR will present the Martin Luther King, Jr. Peace Award to S.O.S. at their Art to End Violence event, a multimedia contest exhibition and awards ceremony, on May 26th at Launchpad (721 Franklin Avenue, Brooklyn NY), from 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.