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'Make It Happen' Program Offers Outlet for Youths Haunted By Memories of Violence

By **Samuel Lieberman** | March 4, 2015



Make It Happen

Kenton Kirby (right), head of Make It Happen, smiles with colleague David Grant (left) and a youth in the program.

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backpack. Three of his classmates, boys who were constantly picking on Sadler, were blocking the door on his way out.

"What are you doing, are you stealing?" they asked.

NEW YORK — It was dismissal. Everyone had left the classroom, but John Sadler had to run back to pick up his

Sadler, 13, knew they were trying to get a rise out of him. "I already knew what was going to happen," he said.

The boys blocked his exit so he pushed them back forcefully with his stocky legs. He ran down the stairs but was no match for his swift pursuers.

(<http://jjie.org/series/ny-bureau/>) "I got to the bottom of the steps and they jumped me right there," Sadler said. "They were stomping on my knees, my ankles. They kicked me on my side." Sadler limped to the shelter where he and his mother were staying.

His mother came to school the next day. "But I couldn't tell them who did it," he said. "'Snitches get stitches' they said, and I didn't want that to be me."

So Sadler bottled up his fear and anger and confusion. For years, he was tormented at the series of Brooklyn public schools he attended. He could not afford to buy the clothes he really wanted, and kids would make fun of the dirty shirts and skinny green jeans he wore to school every day.

"Kids would say, 'Your mother picks out your clothes, she's dumb. She's stupid,'" he said. His classmates nicknamed him "African" because of his darker skin tone.

He became silent. He rarely lifted his head, even for several years after high school. Sadler turned up the music in his headphones, and ducked his head under his hood — half hidden from his classmates' stares and catcalls and half defending himself from an attack from behind.

His life could have continued like this but he met Kenton Kirby.

Kirby, 34, runs Make It Happen (<http://crownheights.org/makeithappen/>), a program funded by the Office for Victims of Crime within the Crown Heights Mediation Center (<http://crownheights.org/>). He talks to young men ages 16 to 24 who display symptoms of trauma from growing up around community and gun violence.

These are young men who have little to no outlet for their pent-up aggression or fear, Kirby said. They are encouraged to keep their problems to themselves, or within the family.

He works in a community where people are not encouraged to seek out mental health professionals, he said. If they do, the therapists they can afford take Medicaid and thus may have 200 other clients and could be reassigned at any moment.

Kirby knows what music his kids listen to and he knows what teams they support. He takes them to games and rags on them, joking around like a wise and goofy adult friend. He sees six guys individually and stays connected to his former clients on an as-needed basis.

"My guys don't really have a space to process complex emotions," Kirby said. "When someone acts out, a lot of times, there is some unrecognized trauma."

Kirby's way of creating a space for his guys to process is to first break down what it means to "man up," which he feels is a way of trying to remain safe.

(<http://jjie.org/hub/racial-ethnic-fairness/>) "A lot of young black men don't want to be looked at as victims," Kirby said one afternoon in the back of the Mediation Center. He was explaining his initiative to a circle of teenagers from Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets, a group that gets young people involved in the battle against gun violence. He wanted to help them better understand the hidden costs of gun violence: trauma and PTSD.

"They want to say, 'This is normal,'" Kirby said to a circle of nodding heads. "No, this is not just how it is."

One young girl who had been making quiet jokes on the edge of the circle raised her hand and asked what was on everyone's mind: How does his group help alleviate gun violence?

Kirby explained that people are acting out because they are scared and have a mess of emotions they have not dealt with properly.



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headphones.

"What are you listening to?" Kirby demanded. "Man, Drake? This is what you listen to get pumped up for basketball? I don't know about that."

The kid laughed and shook off the diss. Kirby sat and watched the game. He had kids on both teams so ended up cheering for both sides.

"I'm essentially a social work cheerleader," he said.

Kirby sees himself as providing a new resource for kids who originally just had themselves to rely on.

"If I'm poor and I don't have many resources out of my own body, then to keep myself safe, I'm going to poke my chest out," Kirby said. "We 'man up,' with whatever resources we have so that we can stay safe."

Amy Ellenbogen, the project director of the Crown Heights Mediation Center, said the organization collectively is a similar resource.

"We want to create a norm change through community mobilization." Ellenbogen said.

Sadler, now 21, has come out of his shell, and attributes much of his success to Kirby's program. He found a space where he could work through his fear and find some kind of safety.

He is now taller than Kirby, his back finally straight.

He described a moment after a shooting when those involved would talk about revenge and "manning up."

"No, let's talk about why you feel you haven't shed a tear for your sister or brother," Kirby said.

On that note he had to rush out and head up Kingston Avenue to Achievement First, a local charter school where two of his "kids" were playing in a junior varsity basketball game.

Kirby said he puts a lot of energy behind his kids' accomplishments. It is important for emotionally fragile teenagers to know there are people out there who will celebrate their victories with them.

He said he hopes he can be a positive fixture as well as essentially "one of them." At the game he grabs one of his kid's