

DO YOU BELIEVE IN SECOND CHANCES?

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION
INTERVIEW CONDUCTED
BY NATHANIEL TEICHMAN

Nathaniel Teichman is a senior at Tufts University majoring in International Relations. He worked as a law clerk in the Lowell Juvenile Court where he researched the School-to-Prison Pipeline along with school push out and disproportionate minority contact. He will be working with Physicians for Human Rights.

– “Every day I’ve got a funeral or a wake to attend.”

Teny Gross is not describing the mounting death toll in Iraq or the constant threats facing American troops in Afghanistan. Instead, Gross, a former Israeli soldier and graduate of Tufts University and Harvard Divinity School, is talking about the stark reality of a war much closer to home – the war on the inner city streets of our cities. Renowned as one of the architects of the “Boston Miracle” that radically lowered the number of homicides and violent crime in Boston, Gross has continued his work with at-risk youth in Providence, Rhode Island. Now the director of the Institute for the Study and Practice of Non-Violence, Gross leads a team of street workers, tirelessly fighting to prevent the juvenile violence that is tormenting the city of Providence. With an estimated 1,400 active gang members, Gross and his team are struggling to give kids an opportunity to rise above the violent life that surrounds them.

David Cartagena’s life is a story of hope. A powerfully built man with a gentle demeanor, Cartagena knows all too well the hurdles that lay in wait for a child in Providence. Raised in a broken home, he sought the family he never had in the embrace of the Latin Kings Gang. Entrenched in gang life at an early age, he ended up on the wrong side of the law and found himself in juvenile lockup. Sitting in his cell, he needed only to look out his window to see his future. Prison guards constantly reminded him and his fellow inmates that they would end up at the adult correctional facility that stood there. According to the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, there is an approximately 46 percent recidivism rate in the state (2004 Recidivism Study: Two-Year Follow-Up by Bree E Derrick and Greg McCarthy, August 2007), of which Cartagena was all too aware. The trend of recidivism is a disturbing one that is not only disrupting life in Providence, but also affecting the nation as a whole. After several arrests and lockups, Cartagena fought through his dire circumstances and dedicated his life to helping others

tackle the problems he faced as a child. Now a senior street worker at the Institute for the Study and Practice of Non-Violence, Cartagena works with kids to keep them in school and out of gang life.

In the working class town of Lowell, Massachusetts, a man strides up the front stairs and through the metal detector of a solidly built, brick courthouse. Walking along the long corridor leading to the judge’s quarters, First Justice Jay Blitzman passes a nervous looking group of alleged juvenile offenders waiting their turn in court. Everyday, Blitzman sits and tries a seemingly endless array of juvenile court cases, ranging from truancy violations to serious violent crimes. Like Gross and Cartagena, Blitzman has devoted his life to helping kids who face a wide array of difficulties. He was a public defender for more than 20 years and is the founder of the Youth Advocacy Project.

This school-to-prison pipeline shuttles children out of the classroom, where they are safe and monitored, and forces them onto the street, where they are more likely to commit crimes, or even worse, be killed. School dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be incarcerated in their lifetime, and 68 percent of state prisoners are dropouts.”¹ Blitzman said, “It is also important to emphasize that these problems are national in scope and directly related to the crisis in public education that has had profound ramifications regarding access to justice for children and their families. Fifty-four years after Brown v. Board of Education, the systems of public education for children of color and white children are still separate and unequal. Research has shown that in the majority of our major cities, approximately half of the children who enter ninth grade fail to graduate. A disproportionate percentage of these children are children of color and a disproportionate percentage of these children unfortunately later make their way into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This process raises significant questions regarding issues of class and race in America. Tackling the problem is a public safety imperative.”

So what is being done to fix the myriad of problems facing children in America’s cities today? Teny Gross, David Cartagena and Jay Blitzman gathered together to discuss

their different perspectives on the problem and to consider possible solutions:

Cartagena: I met a gentleman last Saturday. He is an alum from Brown [University]. He asked me, ‘What can I do, as a Brown graduate, to help out with the kids in the school systems that you work in? Like, what can I do in these inner city public schools to make a difference?’ And I said, ‘You know to tell you the truth, you can show up. Let them see someone 19 to 20 years old not only in college but graduated from college. To them, that’s a testament of success. They don’t see that. I mean it might sound miniscule, but to kids it’s like seeing a pro-athlete and it’s not glorified enough. Sure the athletes are, the sneaker contracts are, the hip-hop rappers are, but the college education isn’t. The college student isn’t. You know, the pro-active college student that is in a social organization, that is in a fraternity, that cares about being, giving service back to the community. That’s not glorified at all. You rarely ever hear of it unless you’re on campus. You know what I mean? And I want to talk about education real quick.

But I’m going to say something first and equate it back to education. I was a couple of weeks on the job and, Teny remembers this ‘cause he just happened to be with us this night, we were responding to a gang shooting with some YB kids and some mothers on Sackett Street on the south side of Providence. (YB is Young Bloods; the name of a gang.) And, as we get there, the police gang unit had already arrived. So there were regular officers, gang unit officers, and the sergeant of the gang unit, who runs that unit, sees me. It was my first few weeks on the job, and he says to Teny, ‘What the fuck is he doing here?’ So right away, what happened to me?

I’ll tell you what happened to me, and then we’ll equate this back to the educational system. What happened to me was, I went from feeling confident and confident about being able to help my community and making a difference and impacting the situation and being out there to do something constructive to all of a sudden feeling very incompetent and to feeling very ineffective and to feeling not socially accepted at all. [Since then the Sgt. has become a big fan of David’s, added Gross.]

The reason why I bring that up when talking about education is because it reminded me of when I was a little kid. It reminded me of being socially deprived, economically disadvantaged, emotionally sheltered and going into a school and somebody telling you, ‘perform this,’ and you don’t have any idea. So when you go into that public school system, there’s nobody there to help you feel socially competent.

When you fail, it’s your fault. Nobody takes that kid and says, ‘What’s the underlying issue? What’s this kid’s background? What’s this kid’s situation? Let’s bring the kid’s parents into school.’ Around the time they get to doing that, is when they’re already failing you. It’s when you’ve already jumped to the point of school refusal. Now, you’re making excuses to not go to school. All of a sudden you’re sick, and these physical symptoms are actually very legitimate because you can become physically sick because of those conditions. So, now you’re making excuses not to come to school. So now, you’re also labeled as a truant. But you’re not. You’re refusing to go school for legitimate reasons, but you’re too young to voice your frustration and to voice your opinion about it. And now you’re stuck.

And by the time you get to that court system, you have the wrong label. You have the wrong label. So how can we effect change in the educational school system? Empower them. No matter where they’re from.

Blitzman: Here’s an example, there’s an alternative school in the city. It’s a great school. I see kids there that I see in court. I can’t go as much as I’d like because I’m not the lawyer anymore. I can’t create a relationship with them because I am going to be adjudicating them. That’s an ethical concern. But I see these kids as kids. I see them thriving, and I see a school that tries to get to them individually. And then I see the kids when they leave that school and go back to the big high school. All of a sudden, they’re labeled again. And they can’t shake that tag.

People don’t get past the label. And we don’t do enough diagnostics to understand what’s going on. Some of the

kids were described to me as the worst possible kids; they thrived in this school. What do they have? They've got people who are able to take the time. The school is small. They find a way to enfranchise, to empower, to understand, and these kids take off. They thrive.

I go to their Law Day. Every year, they have Law Day across the country, and this is the school I go to. And I don't talk about the theme of Law Day. I say, I'm here to answer any questions that you have. The question that I always hear every year is 'What's the best part of the job?' They also ask questions that really bring tears to my eyes. You know, there are some things that I can't answer. 'Is it easy for you to lock a kid up?' 'Is it easy for you to take a kid away?' We can send kids to prison for life in our juvenile court. We have done it a lot. These kids ask questions that go to the heart. These kids are asking about the most visceral things.

The question that always breaks my heart is 'Do you believe in second chances?'

And I've had the toughest kids say that with tears in their eyes. The kids who I went and saw with this program were being honored as students of the year. They were on the honor role. They're bright kids.

And tragically, I've seen these kids go from that environment back to the large high school, where they fall back.

Gross: It is very difficult to advocate the position he does in the legal system.

Blitzman: I've come to understand the pressures that under-resourced school systems are dealing with as well as the public safety implications of school drop out. Educators and juvenile justice professionals are in the business because we care about children. If you could do any one thing, I would advocate the implementation of a systemic tutoring system for any child who would avail themselves of that service. I believe that drawing on resources of college and university schools of education to create tutoring internships is a cost effective collaboration. We meet monthly in Lowell to explore such collaborations outside of the polarized context of court cases. The city's school superintendent and police superintendent attend regularly in an effort to maximize limited resources and address the complexities of the problem.

Interviewer: Dave and Teny, you guys are both here with these kids. What do you see? I imagine you do some form of mentoring or tutoring. Is that working? Is that hard to implement? Do you see it as a viable solution? Do you see alternatives?

Blitzman: Or does it even help?

Cartagena: The resources are not being invested. I mean sure, it costs a little more to lock somebody up, but it's a little easier too. Know what I mean? To try and get to the heart of

the issues, to try to discover human nature, to care and not be desensitized to whatever it is they are going through, it takes a real person to get involved like that. And a lot of people just either don't have the time, don't care to have the time, or can't relate to this person on that level. Because this person is down here. This person is a throwaway kid.

That's how the system, I think, as a whole looks at a lot of these kids. The system looks at them like that. You know, I'd like to help the kid out, I'll throw him a dime here and there. But I don't want to invest in him. I'll give him a little bit of my time, but that's all I can do. And that's how it is.

But what you do is you nurture, you plant the seed. And now you grow somebody that can help your generation, and the next generation.

We live in a very materialistic culture. We live in a very violence-driven culture. So there is nobody there that has the human capacity and that love for humanity any more the way it used to be on the scale that it used to be. I mean I might sound like I'm from the daisy age or something right now. But it's true, it's what we need. It's what Martin Luther King Jr. talked about. "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." I wholeheartedly believe that. I wholeheartedly believe that.

And kids aren't being taught that. Kids are being taught the complete opposite. Hate your fellow man because he don't care nothing about you. And if he sees you on the ground, he's gonna walk by and stomp on you as he's going by. So you take what you can from this life. So they grow up and know that it's every man for himself. And they gotta get what they can. And that's why you see the proliferation of violence and the way it's escalated to the extent where kids will chop your head off now. You know what I mean. Because it's what they are learning from the other generations, it's what they are learning from everyone else.

So it's up to us to bring it back to the basics, to bring it back to some normalcy, to extend ourselves to them. When I do presentations, people say, 'Wow you work with kids in gangs, you work with kids that are high at risk, you know, how is that?' And I say, what do you mean, I'm just a human being. I'm just doing something that an average member of the community should be doing. I'm just touching them with love. That's all I'm doing. It's what they want. It's what they don't get. It's what they yearn for. It's unavailable to them.

Blitzman: That's a powerful message. These kids don't get that.

A noted researcher, Kathy Spatz Widom writes about the cycle of violence. She compares children who are abused and neglected to baby crocodiles, who are abandoned at birth. She says the crocodile spends the rest of its life getting even. So you've got a lot of angry kids. It's not surprising. For me, some of the kids that I respond to the most positively, are some of the kids that people say have attitude problems. And you know, I'm in court

and I see this kid and I see moxie and feistiness and I say, wow. I get excited. I get a little tingle that that kid has resilience. I'm thinking if I was in his situation I would be catatonic, gumming food in the corner. This kid might survive just in spite of well-intended do-gooders like me because this kid has something going on. Those are the kinds of kids that I think are the easiest to reach out to because there's something there and they want it, they want to be helped. It's important that we teach accountability but we have to be very intentional in how we deal with confrontational youth. We have to be more than merely reactive. Dr. Ross Greene, who wrote *The Explosive Child*, teaches that with confrontational children, a significant percentage of our delinquent population, we have to learn how to engage in a different manner, unless we want to re-create the very type of behavior we seek to avoid. Some of it is caring and some of it is training. But a lot of it, is thinking about doing things just a little bit differently.

Gross: C. S. Lewis said, 'Decent conduct doesn't pay to any particular person at any given moment. It pays to the whole human race as a whole.' So that really typifies the way I try to view life now. And it's the way that these kids really need to be touched. Because some kids, what they really need is they still need to be nurtured and to be brought up decently so that they won't go on to harm the next person, so that they don't go on to harm my mother, or your daughter, or your sister.

Interviewer: You can't really talk about what you can do with someone's family, it is the hand they are dealt, but what you are saying is that these schools are so important because they determine if the kids feel like abandoned crocodiles or empowered individuals. If you had the ear of any politician and their pocketbook wasn't struck by a financial crisis, what could be a possible game changer? What's failing in these schools, is it the size? Is it the competency of the teachers?

Blitzman: We are leaving every child behind because we haven't funded the initiative [No Child Left Behind].

Cartagena: I went to a school called Perry Middle School on Hartford Ave in Providence, so I was in that school from 1982-84. That school hasn't changed a bit. It's the same exact school, same building, which is like 100 years old. But what's changed is the ethnic makeup, the nationality of the school. It is now 83 percent Hispanic and probably 83 percent of teachers are Caucasians, so probably nobody understands the culture that these kids come from. You might have two ESL [English as a Second Language] teachers in the whole school. These kids, in my opinion, are getting the short end of the stick.

The school is doing what it's always done, they just haven't evolved with the community. The community is what's evolved. The community is more ethnically diverse, but the school staff is still 80 percent white you know. They don't understand that some of these kids are Guatemalan, Ecuadoran, Salvadoran, Venezuelan, Costa Rican. They don't understand the difference, they just lump them all together. When these kids are fighting, it's you know 'these two Spanish kids are fighting,' you know 'what are they

fighting about?' You miss the heart of the problem, and it will be ten or fifteen years from now before the schools realize the problem. It will be too late for the kids who have to live it today.

Blitzman: It's like in Lowell, you know they're all Asian kids, so there's no difference between Laotians, Vietnamese and Cambodians. Wrong. If you're a student of history, you'll see that you have 300 years of conflict.

Interviewer: How are you getting people in positions to understand, to see these conflicts and differences?

Cartagena: Well, I try to educate them myself, whenever I'm doing conflict resolutions or mediations within the schools. Whenever I'm sitting in and advocating for a child with his parent, and the child is facing a suspension or in-house focus, I sit there and I work hand in hand with the administration, with the principal. I keep them updated on every kid. I come in with the little street-level knowledge I have and I come out looking more important than they are. Maybe I should get that seven-figure salary they're making because a situation will arise and they won't have a clue about what it was about. I go, and I already have a prior relationship with the students, and I talk to them. I understand them. They trust me, and they know that I'm someone who cares about them. And there are not enough people like that in schools and that's the biggest problem. The kids will always gravitate and tell the truth to the person that they know cares, the person that really knows and has the interest in them. The person that's just there because they have a job and that's their salary -- the kids are gonna lie to them, manipulate them, connive them, get over on them.

Blitzman: I'm not Cambodian. We try to get street workers to come to court because they have a much better shot at making a connection than I'm ever gonna have. I like to get off the bench and sit down and talk to people. I remember doing this once in a case with a Cambodian family. So I was looking at somebody, and the guy is not looking at me. He's being evasive. And Keto Tan, the Khmer interpreter, said to me later, 'I know you were trying to do a nice thing, but you were being disrespectful to that family because he was trying to be nice by not looking at you. When you look someone in the eye, that's a very hostile, aggressive thing. That's very confrontational.'

Gross: It is not one thing that makes a kid successful. You need options.

I was a middle class kid growing up in Israel. When I no longer felt like building airplanes, I could try soccer. You need discipline, you need structure, you need love, and you need to be read to. We need to restore music. In Providence, Toshiba donated musical instruments to the school system. After a while Providence Schools called Toshiba and said thanks, but we've got to give them back to you. They are new I know, but we fired the music teachers, so we don't need the donated music instruments.

We get depressed if life has no beauty, if there is no purpose to it.

I'm sick and tired of those people not on the front line, not asking the important questions like: 'how many front-line youth workers does a city of a certain size and certain poverty levels need.' It's like a war orchestrated from the Pentagon; you aren't going to win unless you have soldiers on the ground. In Providence, we are trying to. It has been ten years, but its getting close, also because the economy is actually helping us. To actually make the juvenile jails smaller, kids go faster into halfway houses, that are going to have more programming and community. So those are positive, concrete juvenile reforms that are now being recommended. We have 'Kids Count' in Rhode Island, which has all the data and numbers on how kids are doing and how they are being fed and whether they have health insurance and food stamps. And together we are a really formidable advocacy coalition around the State House. I always said as a streetworker in Boston, 'If you are only working with kids, you are a failure. If you don't use what you hear from the kid to change the adults' mindset, you are really not advocating for the kids.' We need to change the rules.

Blitzman: One of the great things about the UTEC [United Teen Equality] program is the engagement that we have been talking about. When you go to a UTEC event, the whole thing is run by kids. They present, they introduce, and they lead. It's theirs. It's really about empowerment. They feel they own a piece of whatever it is. As opposed to us, the adults, telling them what is in their best interest. Which is huge. It's a different model of engaging kids. I mentioned Ross Greene. He's pioneered an approach called collaborative problem solving. He's consulted with the Maine juvenile correctional system to reduce the use of chemical and physical restraints by training staff how to interact with oppositional kids in a different way.

Ross Green will say, 'Kids who can, can; kids who can't, can't'. In other words, if I say to a kid if you don't do A, I'm going to lock you up. Well amazingly, a lot of kids don't do A. So the question is, is it because the kid is being a real jerk, or is it because there is a wiring problem or something that you have got to get behind? So Green talks about different ways to engage with kids, training staff to deal with kids so they don't have to use four point restraints, let alone chemical restraints. And the responses are generally very positive. Because again, it's a different kind of way of engaging kids. And it doesn't cost money. It's a philosophical approach.

Gross: Well, if the kid already feels he is already an empowered person, he can take criticism and he will do "A" work.

Blitzman: Here is another example. There are hundreds of thousands of kids in the Unified School district in LA County. They suspend over 7,000 kids a year. They've got this school-to-prison pipeline. They have huge gang problems. In 2007, they adopted a different type of school discipline policy, one that uses graduated sanctions. This was developed to try and combat zero tolerance and the School Board unanimously adopted it.

They did it out of desperation, because what they were doing wasn't working. It is too new to have measurable results. But you know if you can change a discipline policy in one of the largest school districts in the country, maybe there is reason to hope. Maybe this will work. There are programs that you can adapt and hopefully draw upon.

It's a question of using limited dollars wisely and investing in systemic approaches that better protect public safety and improving trajectories for kids and their families.

Cartagena: You can spend ten million a month to send guys in arms to another country, then you can probably spend two million a month to have guys defend this country. Preserve life in this country. Like Teny said, \$40,000.00 a year (per streetworker).