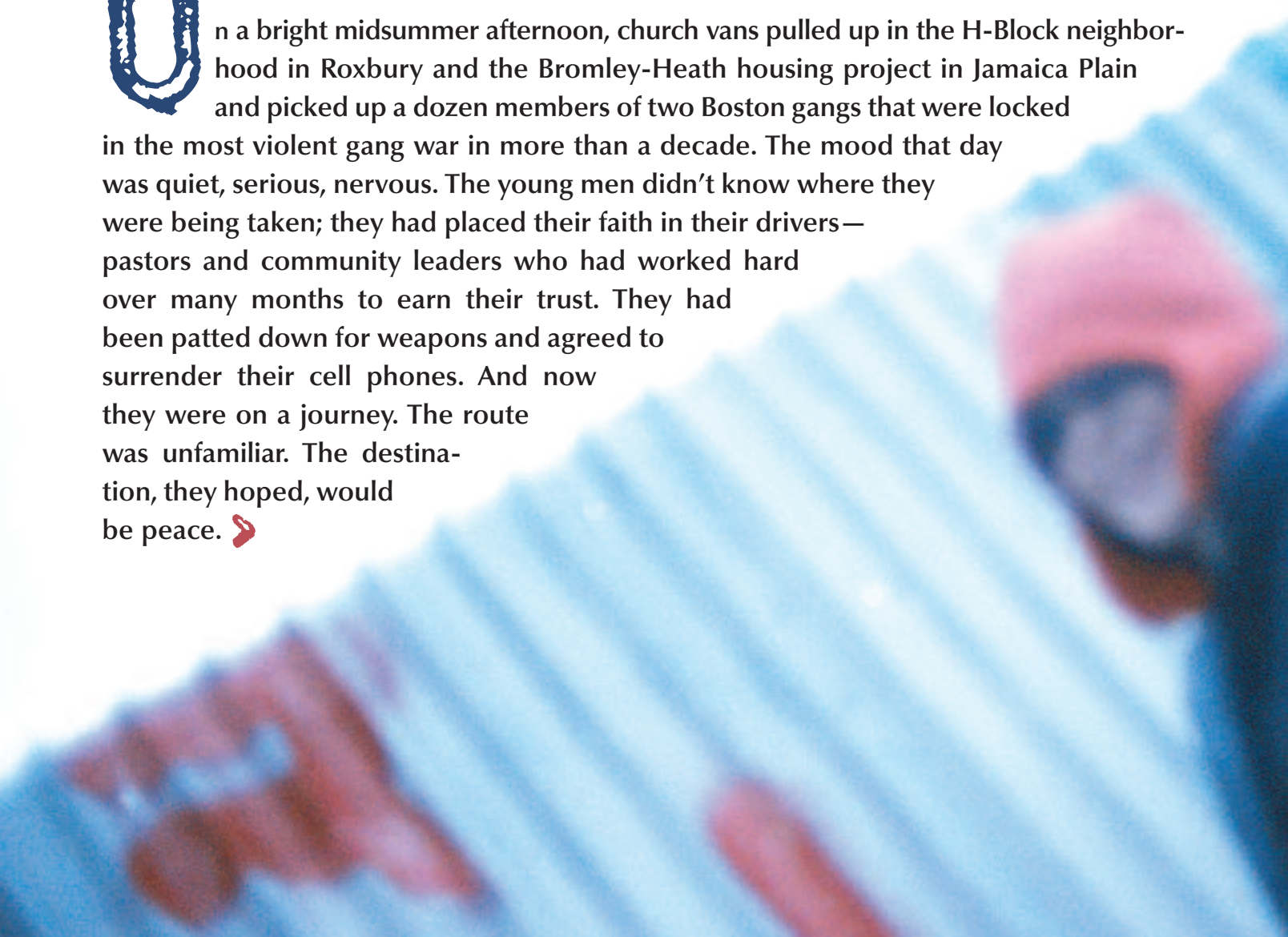


# GANG

# TRUCE

BY JOHN OUELLETTE

**O**n a bright midsummer afternoon, church vans pulled up in the H-Block neighborhood in Roxbury and the Bromley-Heath housing project in Jamaica Plain and picked up a dozen members of two Boston gangs that were locked in the most violent gang war in more than a decade. The mood that day was quiet, serious, nervous. The young men didn't know where they were being taken; they had placed their faith in their drivers—pastors and community leaders who had worked hard over many months to earn their trust. They had been patted down for weapons and agreed to surrender their cell phones. And now they were on a journey. The route was unfamiliar. The destination, they hoped, would be peace. ➤





COALITION  
ARRANGES  
A PEACE SUMMIT  
THAT CHANGES  
A CULTURE  
OF VIOLENCE

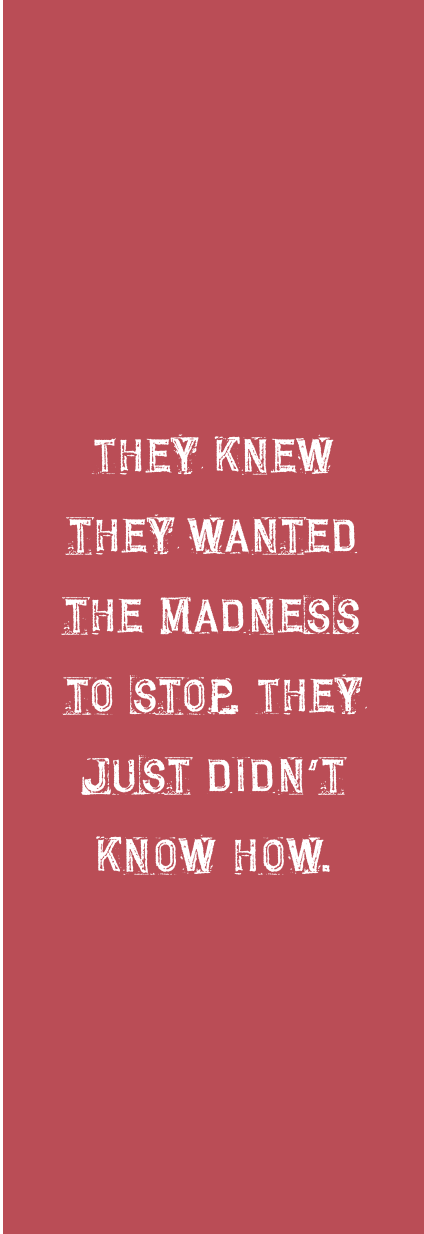
The gangs had seen many of their members fall to violence over the past several years, as Boston's homicide rate climbed to a ten-year high (seventy-five in 2005, followed by seventy-four in 2006). Still more of their comrades had gone off to jail after being convicted of violent crimes. The pattern in the streets was well-established: a violent act by one gang led quickly and purposefully to a violent response by the other. Retaliation was the street code. But it was getting them nowhere. They knew they wanted the madness to stop. They just didn't know how.

Reverend Jeffrey Brown, a driver of one of the vans, was unable to sleep the night before what has been dubbed a "peace summit," held last July 24. There were countless ways that things could go wrong. Organizers were attempting to bring to the table—to talk—two groups that were more used to pointing guns at each other. There was bad blood, animosity, a deep, unsettled history. Brown and the other organizers spent weeks agonizing over the plan, examining every detail, finding ways around anything that could trigger a bad outcome. They were in uncharted territory. There was no manual to turn to, no authority to provide guidance.

"We realized that there was an awful lot at stake," Brown says. "It wasn't just peace of two groups, but it was also peace of two communities at the start of an anti-violence movement in our city, and possibly beyond. ... We knew that if we could do this, and do it well, that we could do it again and again. So we had the weight of that on us, and the hope of that on us."

The vans that day took the gang members from the relative security of the streets they knew, through parts of

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the city they had never seen, to the impressive white edifice of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, with its sweeping view of Boston Harbor. It was after hours, but arrangements were made to open the museum's doors for the summit. The dramatic setting was part of the plan—a statement to participants about the historic importance of the occasion.

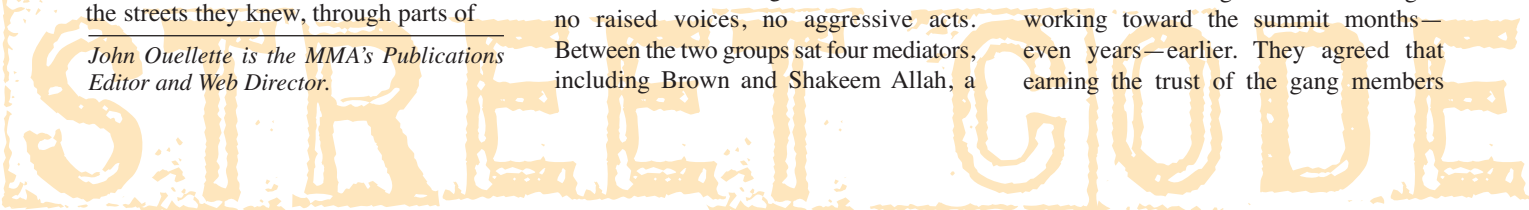
Further setting the tone, the event opened with a prayer. The gang members, sitting at tables facing each other, agreed to rules of conduct for the day. There would be no talking over each other, no raised voices, no aggressive acts. Between the two groups sat four mediators, including Brown and Shakeem Allah, a

former gang member turned youth outreach worker. Clergy were prepared to use their experience in defusing tensions and redirecting tense conversations in a positive direction. The discussion was not without its uncomfortable moments, but in the end the gang members agreed to try a truce. The plan at the time was to keep things quiet through the rest of the summer, but organizers hoped success would beget success and the peace could be extended indefinitely. The meeting lasted forty minutes, capped by a meal of pizza and soda.

## QUIET SUCCESS

Word about the truce spread quickly on the streets. Neighborhoods sprung back to life, and people felt comfortable sitting on their front porches again. But the general public was largely unaware of the cease fire. No one involved said a word. It was more than three months before the *Boston Globe* broke the story, and even then city leaders and the Boston Police Department were very cautious about what they said. The secretive nature of the truce was a key component of the plan. If the gangs got a whiff of politicians—or anyone—using the truce to further their own agenda, credibility would be lost, and the fragile agreement was likely to collapse. [The Boston Police Department, which played an important supporting role in the truce effort, declined to comment for this story. A spokeswoman said, "We have not been discussing truce efforts publicly."]

Reverend Brown, a co-founder of the Boston TenPoint Coalition, a grassroots anti-violence community group, and the other organizers had begun working toward the summit months—even years—earlier. They agreed that earning the trust of the gang members



# BETTER LIFE

was the first—and possibly most important—step. The inner-city youths were notoriously distrustful of the police and politicians, so it would take the involvement of other players in order to make progress. Clergy and community leaders began walking the streets of the troubled neighborhoods, making their steady presence known. The key, Brown says, was consistency. Gang members are dismissive of those who show up only when the news cameras are rolling, but they just might warm up to someone who sticks around. Eventually, after a prolonged period of silence and suspicion, the clergy and community leaders began to connect with the youths. They began to call Brown “The Rev.”

“These kids are real, they’re not monsters,” Brown says. “A lot of them have been dealing with really tough circumstances and they do the best they can. Reaching them takes time. It takes a lot of effort, but you can do it. ... They want to see commitment, and they are very wary of people who try to exploit them.”

Organizers don’t take credit for the truce; they say the idea came from gang members themselves. In June, a gang member was shot eleven times on a basketball court. The boy survived, but was petrified about returning home from the hospital. His father went to see Brown. He said the gang members were looking for help to find a better way, a better life. That’s when the planning began in earnest.

## A TRUCE TESTED

The truce faced its first major test about four months in. After a year in jail, Jahmol Norfleet returned to his neighborhood having decided that things would be different this time. A former leader of the H-Block gang, Norfleet had stopped

carrying a weapon and began working with community organizers to promote peace. But on November 28, the anniversary of the murder of Heath Street gang member Carl Searcy, Norfleet was gunned down on his grandmother’s porch, a week shy of his twenty-first birthday. He died before his sister’s eyes.

News outlets focused on the timing of the shooting, implying that it was pay-back by the rival gang—and that the truce was all but history. Organizers denounced any rush to judgment and expressed confidence that the truce would hold. Police have been mum on the case. They have yet to conclude the investigation or make an arrest. In such cases, information is hard to come by.

Truce organizers spent hours on the streets that night, and the next, and the next. No one dared exhale. “There was a lot of emotion,” says Brown, “a lot of distraught people.” He called the killing “a setback in the progress,” but not a sign of failure. Clergy and community organizers had warned the gang members that there would be interruptions in the peace, that the type of cultural shift they were working toward takes time.

They urged the youths to be strong-willed and refrain from reacting based on assumptions. They relied on the trust they had built up with the youths through their commitment and steady presence in the neighborhoods.

“They get to know us and they understand our goals as advocates for this culture of anti-violence that we’re trying to create, so there’s a level of trust that’s built,” Brown says. “If no one said anything to them, they would draw their own conclusions. But if I say something to them they’ll consider what I have to say. ... So we went back to them and said, ‘Give us a chance to work on this.’”

Jack McDevitt, associate dean of Northeastern University’s College of Criminal Justice and a consultant who has been following Boston’s gang truce, says its viability is ultimately up to the gang members. “These things only last as long as the kids continue to be committed,” he says. “That’s the key.”

He says organizers can foster the commitment of gang members through positive reinforcement and by working to address their concerns and needs.

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“A LOT OF THEM HAVE BEEN DEALING WITH REALLY TOUGH CIRCUMSTANCES AND THEY DO THE BEST THEY CAN.”

-REV. JEFF BROWN

## AROUND THE STATE

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make concerted efforts to connect the youths to opportunities and needed resources.

The team is targeting the city's four middle schools. Team members are building an ongoing relationship with the middle administrators and staff, serving as a bridge between the schools and the surrounding community.

Meanwhile, the Fall River Police Department is implementing the Gang Resistance Education and Training program in the city's four middle schools. The program offers a thirteen-week curriculum that includes lessons on resisting negative pressures, resolving conflicts, and understanding the negative impacts of gang membership.

Other aspects of the Fall River program include gang activity suppression through criminal justice interventions, police officer patrols and home visits with probation and parole officers, work with the Bristol County Juvenile Probation Department to supervise gang youth, enforcement of terms of probation, and a variety of patrols by Fall River police.

For more information, contact Fall River Health and Human Services Director Michael Coughlin at (508) 324-2404 or [mcoughlin@fallriverma.org](mailto:mcoughlin@fallriverma.org). ❀

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## GANG TRUCE

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### MAINTENANCE PROGRAM

Immediately after the peace summit, organizers began holding community meetings once a week in each neighborhood. The maintenance program was designed to keep everyone focused and committed. This regular contact, and the developments that came out of the meetings, proved valuable in keeping the gang members on board after the Norfleet killing.

"You cannot [facilitate] a truce and walk away from a continuing commitment," Brown says. "You can't say, 'You're no longer violent, so let's move on to the next thing.' The follow-up meetings become very important."

At the first meeting, youths asked organizers to work on relaxing enforcement of a trespassing law, passed at the urging of the Boston Housing Authority, that they said led to harassment. Many parents had removed their kids from their apartment leases, because if the youths *did* get into trouble with the law, the parents would be evicted. As a result, however, the youths faced the possibility of arrest for trespassing even in their own neighborhood, since they weren't officially listed as living there. These arrests resulted in a police record, which meant they had trouble finding a job. One youth was arrested seven times—all for trespassing. He was unemployed and lacked prospects.

The clergy leaders and community organizers discussed the matter with police. At this point, they had credibility—and bargaining power—with the police *and* the gang members. If they could get both sides to give a little, maybe this could be resolved. Housing Authority and Boston police agreed to ease up, so long as the gang members kept things quiet. Both sides got something out of the deal. "The kids," says Brown, "saw the effects of the work that they've done on a daily basis."

Next, gang members raised one of the most pressing needs in the neighborhoods: jobs. A police record is one barrier. Education is another. (Many gang members had dropped out of high school.) Truce organizers talked to the tenants' organization at Bromley-

Heath, asking if they'd consider holding GED classes onsite. The tenants' organization managed to find some financing, and the class sign-ups began. Out of twenty-five potential candidates, twenty signed up—far more than expected. And they've been attending faithfully.

"We've always said to them, 'You know what, we can't give you any guarantees, but what we can give you is our commitment to trying to make it happen, and that we'll work hard at it.' And they trust that," Brown says. "That's what happens when you build relationships and continue the dialogue with these kids."

### BROADENING THE PEACE

Once the story broke about the Boston experiment, there was talk about replicating the gang truce effort elsewhere. Could the model be used in other neighborhoods? In other cities? Brown thinks so. So does Northeastern's McDevitt. "Kids read the papers too," he says. "They see kids being celebrated for doing this in Boston. ... Maybe they could be celebrated too."

Praise aside, however, gang members have to see that there's something in it for them. They have to be ready to try a different way. "You can't just say, 'All right, we're all going to have truces,' because the kids might not be in a place where they're willing to do that," McDevitt says. "Obviously if the kids initiate it then they're ready. Or, someone who knows the kids can make the suggestion that this may be a better way. But in the end it really takes a commitment from the kids."

Brown and McDevitt both stress the importance of a patient, low-key approach. "Don't do this so that eventually you'll be lauded as this great person," Brown says. "This is labor-intensive work, time-consuming work. There won't be an efficient, cost-effective way of doing this. ... You're going to have to pay the cost of holding back your frustration with the slowness that it sometimes takes.

"It took a long time for us to get to this point. It's not going to take a day or two to get us out." ❀