

Part 2

Core Idea. If the city wants to foster a successful community, then a community center should be built instead of a juvenile detention facility.

Scene 1. *A handsome woman glances at her watch and walks to the center of the horseshoe-shaped table arrangement. Her warm, somewhat forced smile fades and transitions into a look of consternation with each step she takes. Now standing in front of the table, she raps the gavel and says, "it is seven o'clock, let's get started." The standing citizens take their seats. "Dan, you're up first tonight. Take it away," she says with a nod.*

I walk in front of the horseshoe opening. I am dressed in leather shoes, dark jeans, a button-up shirt (without a tie), and a jacket. It looks professional but not too stuffy. I look around the table of faces, purse my lips and begin.

Dan Tait:

[Intro/Ethos]

Thank you Mrs. Mayor, and thank you all for having me speak tonight. It is unfortunate that not only is the economy challenging the members of our community right now, but in the last three years gang activity has increasingly threatened our city. Though I am not the best public speaker, I am going to do my best.

Several of you asked me to speak about building a community center since the gang problem has touched me personally. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Dan Tait. I grew up in this area, went to college at the UW, and until last summer, I've been in the Peace Corp advising locals on economic development in a town (actually it's about the same size as ours) in Uganda. Several months ago, I was thrilled to have completed my time in the Peace Corps because it meant I got to come back home.

[Narration]

While friends and family had told me about the gang problem, my first week back was a shock. One can't go anywhere without seeing young people loiter in public places with the colors of red, blue, green identifying their gang. On my third day back, my longtime friend, Jeremy Rogers, was killed by a stray bullet from a drive-by shooting. But there has been many other people effected by the uptick in violence. The statistics recently stated that total crime is up 10% since 2007. This is a direct result of gang activity.

The transition has been swift from cultural incubator to crime hotspot. Just four years ago, The Seattle Times praised our city for academic excellence: 80% of high school students went on to university. At the end of 2007, Renee Dobbs (a high school honor student) was severely beaten by a group of gangbangers; she was the first to be hurt in a string of robberies. In 2008, the increase in violent crimes

was officially attributed to gang violence. The diversity of crime continued. Jake's Café – an icon of our city – was robbed during peak hours. Geoff Sanchez was working part-time through college. He was shot while working that day. He lives, but his dreams of becoming a professional distance runner were crushed by the bullet that destroyed much of his left lung. And then, the nationally reported gang fight in our town center, tarnished our cities reputation even more. Twenty-eight gangbangers were arrested that day and seventeen unrelated people were treated for injuries. Gloria Epps, the 28-year city employee is still undergoing physical therapy from being pushed down the stairs in all the confusion.

Back to the present, gang activity is still increasing. Gang membership is estimated at 115% of last year. The city has received a federal grant to tackle our problem. How you choose to spent it will affect our city for the years to come.

[Division]

All of us agree we have to stop this gang problem before our city is destroyed. We all agree that we should have a safe place where we can live, raise families, and enjoy the benefits of our hard work. We also agree that we have an obligation to our neighbors -- we're all in this together. Our city's commitment to advancing our young people through mentorship is another thing we agree about. In fact, my most influential mentor is here tonight. Alan Brown, counseled me through tough times. His guidance started while I was in elementary school. This carried on through university, and even today, I look to his advice. That is why it was such a difficult decision to oppose his stance on the juvenile detention facility. He believes that we should separate the good from the bad. I believe we need to engage our young people.

[Proof]

A decade ago, Crownville, Illinios faced the same situation that we are now. They had an increase in gang activity that was spilling over from Chicago. The people there didn't immediately jump to build more jails. They saw the challenge as an opportunity to shape the lives of so many talented young people. They built a community center. A decade later, that city is a new place: crime rates are down, property value is up and so is the community involvement.

But we don't need to look to the Midwest to know that positive role models are effective. Most of us here tonight have achieved success as a result of our mentors. Mrs. Mayor, you spoke just last month about the former congresswoman that took you under her wing.

A recent study by NGO The Seattle Urban League talks about the problem of gangs. It found that children ages ten through fourteen were especially likely to join gangs. It also showed that 75% of kids in that age range lacked afternoon activities and were "bored." What's more, 55% of kids in this age range didn't feel they could look up to an adult or rely on them. Our city scored a full 25% higher on that metric! We need to engage our kids.

[Refutation]

I'll admit, the kids do have some role models that were not mentioned in those statistics. Those role models are doing an excellent job of engaging the kids. They check in on them throughout the school day, invite them to activities in the evenings, provide a sense of belonging, challenge, and give our kids advice. They are proud members of nationally known organizations. These mentors have powerful reach and are paramount in the nation's most well known institutions.

Who are these influential people and what organizations do they belong to? They are supervisors in the Bloods, Crips, and the Latin Kings. Their institutions of higher learning are Walla Walla and Sing Sing. They have an excellent professional development program. They start off with a grassroots recruitment campaign. Not long after this they go to intensive training in one of the institutions: county jail, federal prison, and the fast-burners even start at juvenile detention centers.

Mr. Brown would have you believe that the solution is to build more jails. He thinks the solution should start here in our city. He would have us construct the very buildings where gangs teach their recruits. Does this sound even a little absurd?

[Conclusion]

We all agree the gang problem is getting out of hand in our city. We need to engage our young people now. The kids joining gangs aren't "those other people" they are our neighbors, cousins, and our own kids. Now is the time to engage them before they are engaged by the gangs.

My old mentor would have you believe that we should build a juvenile detention center. Lock up the troublemakers and throw away the key... except that doesn't work. Those same "troublemakers" will be released at the age of eighteen. They will be wiser, better educated at crime techniques. They will have a greater disregard for laws and the community. In short we will be worse off than we are today.

I look out to the audience and see Geoff, and the family of Jeremy Rogers. I am upset [I pause for a moment... choking back tears. I continue with a shaky voice.] No matter what we do, we can't bring back Jeremy, but we can influence the lives of those that live in our city today. Let us look to the future: let us not segregate, let us integrate our young people. Let's move forward and build a community center.