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Good NEWS

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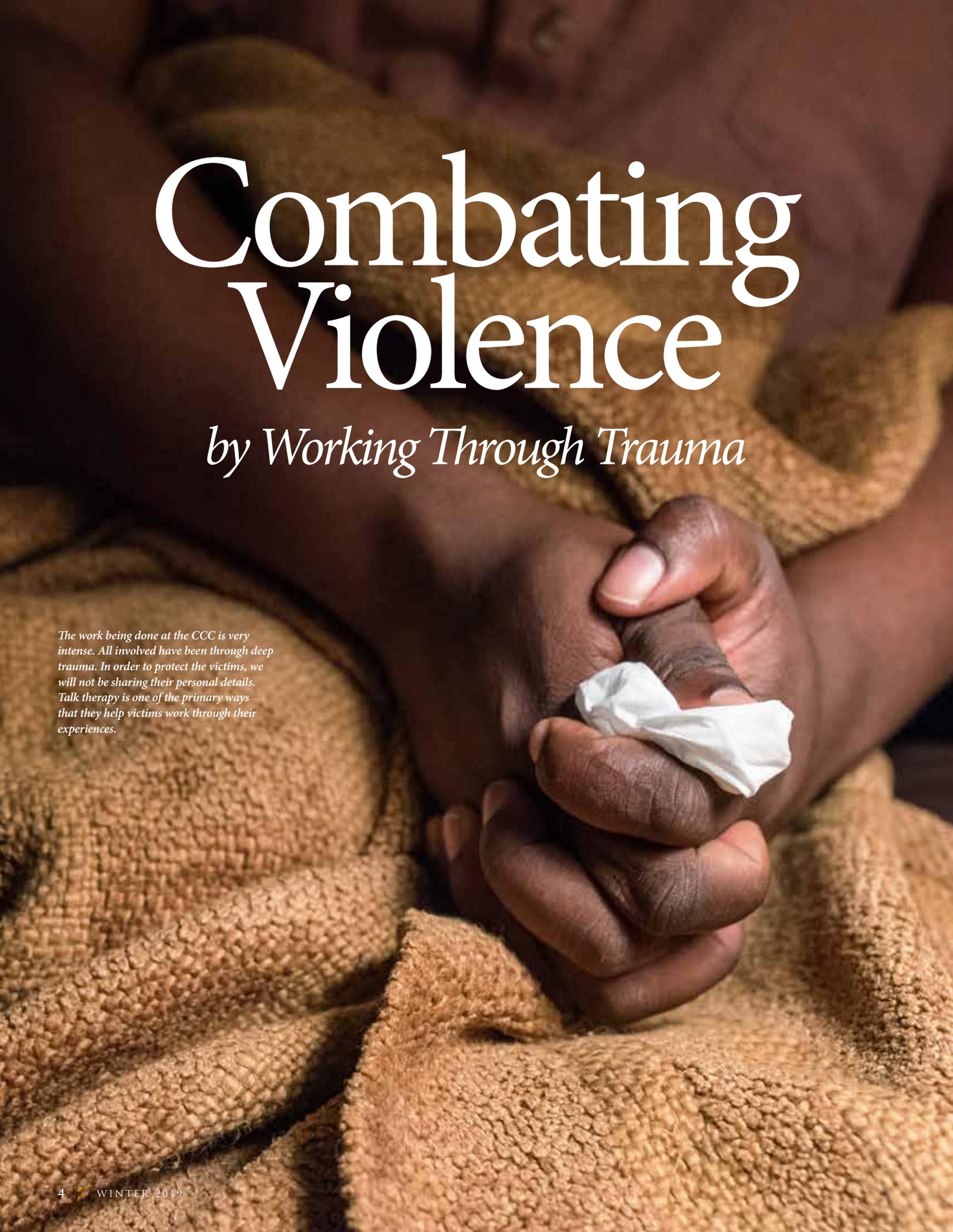


Combating Violence

by Working Through Trauma

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Combating Violence

by Working Through Trauma

The work being done at the CCC is very intense. All involved have been through deep trauma. In order to protect the victims, we will not be sharing their personal details. Talk therapy is one of the primary ways that they help victims work through their experiences.

“WHEN SOMEONE LOSES A LOVED ONE TO AN ACT OF VIOLENCE, IT’S TRAUMATIC. THAT TRAUMA LIVES INSIDE THE BODY FOR A LONG, LONG TIME.”

Jacob* came to the Chester Community Coalition as a nine-year-old—three years after being used as a human shield during a shooting. Although his physical injuries had healed during that time, his emotional wounds had not. He had begun misbehaving and the school he attended had labeled him a behavioral problem. In another instance, a mother and her two daughters, aged 12 and 16, came to the center after losing their son and brother to gun violence. All three were struggling with the loss, especially Sasha,* the 12-year-old, who was experiencing a lot of physical problems in the form of stomachaches and headaches as a result of the trauma. She was missing school and acting out in class and at home.

It’s not a stretch to say that Chester, Pennsylvania, is a battle zone—especially for young men. Settled in 1681 as a safe haven for Quakers, this city of 36,000 located 20 miles southwest of Philadelphia now has the dubious distinction of having one of the highest per capita murder rates in the country. From 2016 through 2018, the murder rate for young men aged 15-34 averaged about 3.3 for every 1,000 people—higher than the average hostile death rate for combat troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As director of Anna’s Place, a welcome center opened by the Sisters of St. Francis in 2009 and committed to being a safe haven to the people of Chester, Sister Jean Rupertus recognized the incredible impact this violence was having on the community every day. “Although we grieved with those who lost someone, attended funerals, and offered families support, we didn’t feel like we were making enough of a difference,” said Sister Jean. “The gun violence continues throughout the Chester community and families have little access to supportive services to help them heal.

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Finance director and board secretary Fran Stier, program director Alexia Clarke, and grant manager Sister Jean Rupertus make up the incredible team that runs the Chester Community Coalition. The women work collaboratively and all three agree that their strengths complement one another.



Community members leave stuffed animals, flowers, and other items at a pop-up memorial for a young man killed by gun violence on the streets of Chester. “There is a lot of anger, resentment, unanswered questions, grief, and sadness among the people here,” said Alexia.

* The names in this story were changed to protect the identities of the children.

“VIOLENCE IS CONTAGIOUS AND TRAUMA IS THE VECTOR BY WHICH VIOLENCE TRAVELS. IF WE CAN HELP PEOPLE COPE, WE CAN REDUCE VIOLENCE.”

An herbalist visits the CCC on a regular basis, providing classes on self-care through natural remedies and bringing items like these herbal sleep pillows which are designed to promote peaceful sleep



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In an effort to help stem the violence, Sister Jean joined with Heeding God's Call to End Gun Violence. It was here that she met Fran Stier, a partner and advocate for families. The group met regularly with victims of gun violence, rallied at gun stores, and advocated for gun law reform but it still didn't seem to be enough. When she learned of an opportunity for a three-year anti-violence grant from Catholic Health Initiatives, Sister Jean teamed up with Fran, started a committee representative of Chester, and applied. Their grant proposal was accepted and the Chester Community Coalition (CCC) was opened in 2018 with the mission "to heal the psychological and emotional impact of homicides and reduce trauma-related violence in the City of Chester."



Alexia Clarke was hired as program director and Fran stepped into the role of finance officer and board secretary. Sister Jean took the role of grant manager. Since that time, funding from various faith communities, foundations, and individuals have allowed the coalition to provide additional services to adults and youth from 8-18 years old as well as art therapy for children 4-7 years of age.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

In disadvantaged communities of color like Chester, homicide bereavement takes a heavy toll that often goes beyond the typical grief that accompanies the death of a loved one. Depression, complicated

Alexia, Fran, and Sister Jean begin their meeting with a prayer, asking God to bring peace to the community of Chester.





Art therapy is an important part of the healing process for many gun violence victims, particularly children. In addition to being an emotional outlet, art therapy can help young people better understand their feelings and open up dialogue about situations that may be difficult for them to share.

grief disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder may extend years after the loss. Children suffer intrusive reimagining, angry outbursts, and hypervigilance. “When someone loses a loved one to an act of violence, it’s traumatic,” said Sister Jean. “That trauma lives inside the body for a long, long time and people are not able to draw on their good memories because they are so wounded. Mothers, sisters, brothers, children. . . they are all traumatized in this cycle of violence. It escalates until there is healing.”

Studies show that high levels of adversity during childhood take a toll that is visible through adulthood. Adverse childhood experiences can lead to hair-trigger reactions to anger and an inability to think through the consequences of actions. The disagreements that lead to violence in Chester are often as seemingly banal as one young man looking at another’s girlfriend or someone going into a store in the wrong part of town. “The young men in this community deserve better than that,” said Fran. “They deserve to have hope that they will have a future.”

Change with the Help of Trauma Counseling

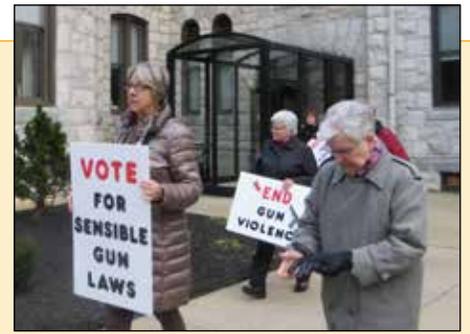
Counseling at the Chester Community Coalition takes place in a closed group format with meetings once a week for 12 weeks. Transportation is provided and

every session begins with a family style meal. The first goal is to help clients come to understand the direct relationship between their feelings, their physical and mental health, and their actions. The second is to empower them with the skills to take care of themselves and improve their quality of life. “Violence is contagious and trauma is the vector by which violence travels,” said Alexia. “If we can help people cope, we can reduce violence.”

Remember Sasha, the 12 year old who came to the center after the death of her brother? Well, as the weeks of counseling progressed, she began to recognize what kinds of things were triggering a heightened emotional state. She found that events like birthdays, anniversaries, or news of another shooting could send her into a downward spiral.

“Just identifying these triggers helps,” said Alexia. “It helps people to understand how trauma affects them so they can move from ‘What is wrong with me?’ to ‘What is happening?’ That is something they can work with.” From there counselors lead participants through group conversations about how to handle negative emotions and thoughts. Clients learn how to direct those feelings, preventing negative emotions from festering and perpetuating more violence in the community. They practice grounding techniques to bring their focus back to the present and reconnect with the thinking side of their brain.

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Participants in the 2018 Gun Violence Vigil gathered in silence outside Our Lady of Angels Convent displaying signs urging others to join in the effort to help prevent gun violence.

Corporate Stand Against Gun Violence

The Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia recently declared a corporate stand against gun violence. Conscious of the growing use of assault and other weapons in our society, we take this stand on behalf of gun safety reform, thereby committing to educate ourselves and others toward a safer culture of life. The statistics of death and injury by gun violence in the U.S. are breathtaking! They challenge us to do what we can to bring to light the enormity and the costs of human life because of the lack of adequate gun safety reform. We plan to take action on this stand by advocating for extensive and up-to-date background checks on people purchasing guns; by participating in actions both locally and nationally that challenge the present gun laws; by voting to elect those who support gun safety reform; by volunteering with organizations who support gun safety reform; by reading and by signing letters and e-mails, and making phone calls to senators and representatives; by including gun safety reform in our daily prayers; and by avoiding shopping in stores that sell guns. Join us in our fight for a safer, more peaceful world. Read more about our corporate stand on our website, www.osfphila.org.



▲ Sister Jean and Lineada Smith from Anna's Place greet one another during a walk to end gun violence. In addition to her work at the CCC, Sister Jean served as director of Anna's Place which provides a safe place for the people of Chester to gather.

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And as for Jacob, “within four weeks of beginning counseling, the school was telling us they were seeing an improvement in him,” said Alexia. “It had been such a short time that we really questioned whether it could be the program making the difference. However, there hadn't been any other change. It was so significant for him to be able to talk about his feelings, to be heard, and to be given the tools to manage his emotions. At the end of the program, we created referrals for him so he could receive more intensive support.”

Very young children often benefit from different approaches to therapy and many are helped by employing art as a way to work through their feelings and move toward healing. One little girl who came to the coalition had been living with her great aunt since her father was killed. The aunt was grappling with how to answer the questions the child was asking. Art therapy helped the girl navigate and cope with her grief. “She was struggling with how to see her father,” said Fran. “Was he still inside the house where she lived? When she drew him outside the house, she wanted to draw another house around him because she didn't want to imagine him without a house around him.”

“We appreciate the impact for children,” said Alexia. “They lose someone to murder



Participants of a Stop the Gun Violence Walk march through the streets of Chester. The walk was created and sponsored by JrKickz, a locally-owned sneaker company committed to raising awareness to end gun violence.

but often can't talk about it. They worry about the pain it causes their caregivers or fear of being shut down. And because organizations are not always trauma-informed, children are accused of behavior problems when they are actually dealing with traumatic grief.”

Taking Healing One Step Further

In addition to its counseling services, the coalition provides a number of alternative programs to support its clients. Two support groups meet—one for people who have survived a violent experience and are living with the effects of that violence and a second for caregivers and family of victims of violence. These groups are open—allowing flexibility in when people can start or join the group and allowing members to drop in when they are able. The support groups are a tremendous source of comfort and encouragement for people who often feel alone in their experiences. “People are grateful to be with others,” said Alexia.

“They tend to keep in touch even outside the group to support each other.”

Recently a licensed herbalist has begun providing herbal teas during precounseling mealtimes and developing aromatherapy sleep aids for families dealing with the effects of trauma such as insomnia and flashbacks. On evenings when she doesn't attend, participants ask when the “tea lady” is going to be back. In fact, her presence has been so well received that she is starting a 10-week class on self-care through natural remedies. “It is wonderful to see the difference in people as the weeks progress,” said Sister Jean. “They become more lighthearted. You see children being children again.”

A Sister's Mission

Sister Jean provides the macroview of the program, offering oversight and serving as the connection with Catholic Health Initiatives. She meets with Alexia and Fran every week and is present before every therapy session interacting with clients. “Sister Jean holds us to our mission and to



◀ Alexia works a table at a Chester block party and health fair. At the table, she hands out herbal sachets and talks to community members about the services the CCC offers. Here she is visited by Ronald Hughes and his daughter. He is a pastor who also works on the CCC advisory board. Moments like this are pivotal for Alexia and the others to connect with the community.



▲ Despite the violence in their neighborhoods, life goes on for the people of Chester, Pennsylvania. Children play in the same streets where many have been killed.



◀ A common sight for residents of Chester is the presence of police during a disturbance or violent crime. The CCC staff have a great relationship with the authorities and even have an officer who serves on the advisory board. The goal of both groups is to break the cycle of violence and to make the streets safer for residents.

our role as stewards of our funding,” said Alexia. “She is a fierce defender of our program and of our families. She helps us to think through the challenging issues. Plus she connects really well to families.”

Alexia tells the story of a 15-year-old girl who came to her first session wearing headphones and with her head down—determined not to engage. “By week five, that same girl came in, walked right over, and gave Sister Jean a hug,” said Alexia. “That’s because Sister Jean is able to make people feel safe.”

The Positive Impact

As expected, it has taken some time for individuals as well as the community of Chester as a whole to come to know and trust the Chester Community Coalition. “People have questions,” Alexia explained. “Is talking about a problem going to make it worse? Is it too close to the pain?” Many are cautious with outsiders. In the past they have seen services pop up in the neighborhood and then disappear. Still the overall reception has been positive. “The word is spreading and we are seeing a positive impact,” Alexia said. “Young people who were completely closed off are express-

ing affection to members of the staff and children who had multiple suspensions from school are being commended for the improvement in their behavior. Those who haven’t had time or space to really care for themselves are practicing skills they have learned at the center.” More and more, people who have heard about CCC are dropping in to talk or learn more. “We intend to be around for the long haul,” Alexia promised. “When people are ready, we will be here.” ■

For more information or comments on this article, contact goodnews@osfphila.org.

HOW YOU CAN HELP...

- Identify and support initiatives in your neighborhood that build social networks, improve public spaces, promote community healing, and foster economic stability and prosperity.
- Educate yourself about legislation targeted at reducing gun violence and why these measures matter. Then write a letter to the editor in your local paper in support of gun violence prevention.
- Encourage your elected representatives to support and advocate for effective gun violence prevention legislation. Vote for candidates who support measures to reduce gun violence.
- Volunteer at a nonprofit near you. The Chester Community Coalition is always looking for volunteers to help with childcare, drive vans, and serve meals. Your community center probably has similar needs.
- Support the CCC! Send a donation to the Urban Affairs Coalition, Attn: Lee Wall, 1207 Chestnut St., 7th Floor, Philadelphia, PA 19107.