



John Solomon, founder of Endangered Kind, an outreach group, on the corner he grew up on, in North Philadelphia. "There's a big cultural gap between young leaders and the city," he says. **BASTIAAN SLABBERS**

The voices missing in antiviolence effort

In January, I got an earnest email about a fledgling Philadelphia gun violence-prevention organization. The sender's name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it right away.

And then it hit me.

I'd met John Solomon in 2016 at a community forum that, looking back, wasn't much different than all the antiviolence meetings I'd attended before and would after.

Except for the moment when Solomon, then 24, rendered everyone silent.

Solomon was 11 when he first held a gun, he told a room full of people convened by then-Attorney General-elect Josh Shapiro. When Shapiro asked him what that felt like, Solomon said: "It was common. I grew up watching people exposing me to guns."

He was 15 when he was shot, 18 when he went to prison for shooting someone.

At the time of that forum, Solomon was on probation after serving nearly five years in prison for assault with a firearm. He was volunteering with his uncle Darryl Shuler, a well-known community activist who had brought him to the meeting.

On Twitter, I noted Solomon's presence and words were a much-needed reality check.

And that, I was reminded last week, is what's consistently missing from these conversations.

Ten days after a mass shooting Feb. 17 near the Olney Transportation Center, where eight people were shot in broad daylight, city officials and activists gathered to call on legislators to enact more gun-control measures.

I watched a livestream of the event and saw familiar faces at the lectern and in the crowd: for the most part, well-intentioned people whose efforts weren't adding up as quickly as homicides. As of March 1, there have

been 77 homicides in Philadelphia, a 24% increase from this time last year.

Solomon's uncle Shuler was there, wearing a baseball cap with the logo of his nephew's nonprofit, Endangered Kind, a growing peer outreach and intervention effort.

Was I missing Solomon somewhere in the crowd? I wondered.

Nope. He hadn't been invited, he told me when I called to catch up, even though his presence would have added a lot to a conversation about why young people pick up guns and what it might take to put them down.

His uncle was the only reason he was in that room in 2016, he recalled, and in many other rooms since, as access was usually reserved for the better-known and -connected community activists.

"It was so mind-blowing to me that I was the only young person in those rooms when I knew it was so important for other young people to have some type of presence in there," Solomon said. "It's changing now, but there's still push-back. There's a big cultural gap between young leaders and the city, and high-risk youth and young adults and the violence prevention community."

That's not to say that many organizations haven't learned enough to at least trot out young people; they just aren't always the ones we need to hear from.

It's why Solomon says he connects with those people teetering closest to the brink, if not already having fallen from it. He knows why young people pick up guns and what it takes to put them down. He knows what it's like to go to prison for shooting someone, and what it's like to try to rebuild your life after that.

At the news conference last week, a woman in the crowd kept asking the same question in various ways, hoping for a better answer.

"What's the plan?"

Well, there are lots of them — mostly on paper — including the mayor's five-year Roadmap to Safer Communities.

But what Philadelphia's gun violence-prevention community really

needs is a reckoning. A no-fear, no-favor accounting of the people and efforts that should make up a cause, not a livelihood.

Except here's the catch: Such a reckoning would most naturally be led by the city department in most need of one: the Office of Violence Prevention. (How's that program audit going that you touted in 2016, guys? Have you hired any more "experts" at salaries north of \$100,000 who have yet to determine which programs are effective and which just sound as if they are?)

So, we're going to have to take another approach.

We can start here: If you're privileged enough to have access to the rooms and spaces where life-and-death decisions about the city's gun-violence epidemic are being made, take a long, hard look around and take stock of who is there and who isn't.

I'd love to believe that enough people would have the courage and character to speak up about who is missing or whose time is up. But when so many are feeding from the same taxpayer-funded antiviolence trough, that will likely happen somewhere between never and when-hell-freezes-over.

So, baby steps. Next time you're called into these spaces, bring along someone you know should be there. Solomon is hardly the only one.

Before someone reads that as advocating to dump all the olds, relax. There are established activists and organizations still doing good work, who know enough to pivot with changing needs and times. But there are also too many who are recycling talking points and efforts that didn't work the first time they were funded.

So, this has to fall on those who care more about saving lives than saving their positions and paychecks.

The question is: Are there enough of you out there to make the kind of change this city needs?

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