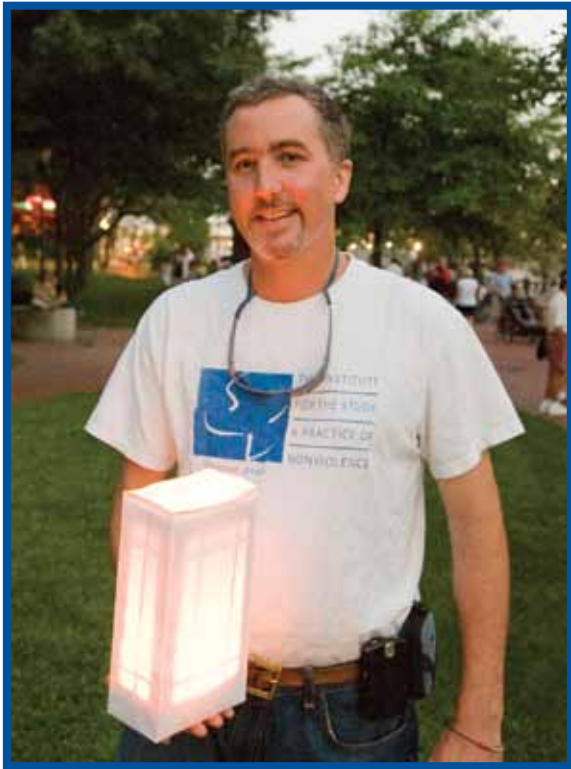


# Teny O. Gross

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## Every Life Should Be Purposeful



Lighting a candle in the darkness. Photograph: ISPN

*In 1989, Teny Gross, a former Israeli army sergeant, was attending Tufts University when racial tensions erupted in Boston. A man called Charles Stuart staged his wife's murder and initially convinced police that the killer was a young, black male. Stereotyping opened old wounds, and urban youth reacted angrily. Gross hooked up with Reverend Eugene Rivers and others who walked the trouble spots and calmed the waters. A coalition of police, hospitals, schools, clergy, and street workers came together, working to identify the few hard core offenders and turn them from violence. The murder rate went from 152 in 1990 to 31 in 1997, earning the collaboration the name "The Boston Miracle." Then in 2001, Gross became the first employee of Providence's Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence, where today he oversees five programs and a staff of 33. The institute teaches the Martin Luther King Jr. method of nonviolence, while continuously refining the street-worker model and replicating it around the world.*

### What led you to violence prevention?

I had the right baggage. My work with Israelis and Palestinians. My Christian-Jewish family from Serbia and Croatia. A grandmother lost to the Holocaust. As a high school student, I was stunned that such a highly civilized country as Germany could become so violent so quickly. All my subsequent studies confirmed for me that civilization is fragile, whether I studied the Greeks, the Romans, Machiavelli's short-lived Florentine Republic, the Enlightenment, the American and English revolutions. In 2000, when I was attending Harvard Divinity School, I asked some Harvard students, "Does it ever occur to you that you might not always live in freedom?" They said, "Never." September 11 shook that certainty.

Antiviolence work for me is about the health of a democracy. America incarcerates one-quarter of the world's jail population. Out of 2,225 kids on life without parole worldwide, all are American. We have a civil war rate of homicide. If you consider pure numbers of violent acts, American inner cities are failed states. That's why I got involved.

### How did the Charles Stuart case affect you?

I was upset. I wanted to drive with cops and see how people got treated. But I said to myself, Life is too short to play Gotcha. So I looked for someone doing something positive. With Reverend Rivers, I walked the inner city, keeping eyes open, listening, learning, and being accessible to kids.

The Boston Miracle was simply hard work and the realignment of resources. Law firm Hale & Dorr got involved, the Federal Reserve, the City of Boston, the police gang unit, probation officers, youth workers, clergy. Out of the 60,000 kids who initially were treated as a potential problem, we found that 1,200 were gang members and only 300 hard core. Suddenly, the problem became manageable. We said to the hard core, "You can reenlist in school, get help finding a job, but if you say no and violence breaks out, you'll get arrested and sanctioned severely." We developed a cadre of practitioners who shared information about everything that was going on so we could deal with violence before it erupted.

In Providence, we now respond to hospitals 24/7 for every shooting and stabbing. The street workers' relationship with

the police is way more sophisticated. We've trained people in Brockton, Fall River, New Bedford, New Haven, Richmond, and California. Belfast. Five Central and South American countries, including Guatemala and Brazil. We supported the relaunch of SafeStreet Boston with our hospital approach.

### **Describe the hospital approach.**

Hospital security staff, social workers, police, community people call us immediately after a shooting or stabbing. It's fine with me to get called by them all. It's my Hobbesian side: systems fail. I don't rely on only one system.

The street workers know who is who. Suppose gang rivals are at the hospital. We deal with them and let the medical staff focus on treatment. The community presence we provide changes the atmosphere. We aren't predisposed to see the victim as being at fault. We see through the victim's eyes and translate what's going on for other workers.

If victims are in any shape to talk, we talk: (a) to show kindness, (b) because we have to be opportunistic. The traumatic moment is a moment of clarity for a person. For example: You've been selling drugs, you don't think anything's going to happen. Suddenly, you're in the hospital, it hurts, you're crying. It's a key moment for the victim. We show up immediately and provide a friendly face from the community. Little gestures can change lives. I've worked with gangs for 19 years, so I'm not naive. But it's amazing what you can get with kindness, with being interested in a person. Young people don't mind criticism, as long as it comes from a place of love.

### **How do you teach nonviolence?**

We offer practical tools for handling life's inevitable conflicts. The program is based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s work. You have to teach nonviolence repeatedly to counter the constant barrage of violent messaging from our culture. Failed environments provide daily dosages of violent learning.

So we use dosages, too, starting in third grade. We counter the violent messages on TV homicide shows and on radio shows that insult elected officials in dismissive, violent language. In our small, obstinate way, we talk about seeing things through an opponent's eyes. People who have empathy, don't kill. The gang members I know always

have a Shakespearian debate going on in their heads about their actions. Adults with positive messages can strengthen one side of that "To Be or Not To Be."

The National Network for Safe Communities, on which I serve, is really the Boston Miracle on steroids. It's determined to offer enough positive messages to kids to meet ambitious goals. I'm pushing for halving the national homicide rate by 2019.

### **Do you ever feel that you'll always swim upstream?**

Yes. But it's the most worthy challenge I know. Consider first that the urban failed state creates injustice. It is unjust that so many mothers lose children to violence in a wealthy country. Second, it costs too much: just 240 of the 16,000 annual homicides rack up \$2 billion annually in costs for police, hospitals, burials, investigations, trials, jail. Not to mention the loss of tax revenue and income. We're making change. My worst enemy is the view that things won't change.

### **How do you convince people that change can happen?**

I start with the frog analogy. If you boil the frog gradually, it won't jump out and save itself. America gradually got used to violence. A dramatic goal like cutting homicides in half can help us jump out of the pot.

Additionally, I tell people to look at the heroes doing the impossible: Geoffrey Canada of Harlem Children's Zone; Pittsburgh's Bill Strickland, who wrote *Make the Impossible Possible*; Dr. Paul Farmer in Haiti; Wendy Kopp from Teach For America. They may be exceptional, but that's not the point. They're innovators. They're just pointing out that we can get great results from kids we've given up on. Our Institute doesn't give up. We just graduated four street workers from Rhode Island College's case management program. People who'd been to jail and never thought they'd see college. Change can happen.

### **Describe your five programs.**

First, the nonviolence training program teaches the philosophy of absorbing hostility and thinking through how to act. We teach it to eight-year-olds, teenagers, juveniles in jail, the police academy, anyone.

Second, street workers—both former gang members and victims. They mediate conflicts large and small in schools

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and wherever the kids are. They're in the hospital, in the court, helping with job placements. They work to reattach kids to their families and to society.

Third is the Beloved Community Summer Jobs Program. When I arrived, there were only 300 summer jobs in Providence. I said, "That's a joke. A city this size should have 3,000." Small as we were, the Institute hired nine. We now work with 40 businesses and nonprofits to hire 100 kids. They're kept busy all summer. They get paid through grants from our partner companies, where the kids work four days a week. On Fridays, we bring them in and teach nonviolence, job readiness, life skills. Mayor David Cicilline is committed to youth, and now there are nearly 1,000 summer jobs in Providence.

Fourth is the victim center, where clinical social workers and case managers support families that have experienced homicide or shootings.

Finally, in February 2009, we started the Juvenile Reentry Program for young offenders. We teach nonviolence in the jail, build relationships, and work with kids when they come out.

We get as many people as possible involved—doctors, Brown University students, Bryant College, Providence College, Johnson & Wales, Community College of Rhode Island, Butler Hospital, Bank of Rhode Island, DCI Design Company. We want to teach the world how to develop our valuable yet neglected human capital.

### **At the end of the day, the goal is to help youth become productive members of society?**

Yes, but it's not just about providing skills for Dunkin' Donuts or keeping kids from selling drugs. No. We believe that all people want to have a purpose, and we want to see life become purposeful for these kids. We want to get the spark back into their eyes.