

Hub students aim for peace, answers in ‘Guns’ art exhibit

Brian Mickelson

In 2007, 64 people were murdered in the city of Boston. Of those, 47 were a result of gun violence. Preliminary Boston Police Department statistics released Jan. 28 put this year’s homicide count at eight, with firearms used in seven of them.

The overwhelming majority of these victims were young, black and Hispanic males residing in Dorchester, Mattapan and Roxbury. Few arrests have been made in connection with these homicides; fewer answers have been found.

Looking for a new way to talk about the problem, a group of students at YouthBuild Boston’s Designery in Roxbury are taking a unique artistic approach to try and shake city residents into action.

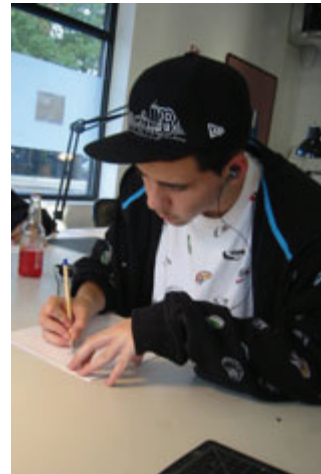
With the help of a number of architecture and design firms, students at The Designery constructed an interactive exhibit that allows visitors to see, up close and personal, the toll that gun violence takes on the young. The Designery is a program that enables young people to explore fields in architecture, construction management, landscape design and other building industry professions.

“We thought that it was really important to address this issue,” said Danae Syverain, a senior at West Roxbury High School and resident of Roxbury. “It’s really important for people to see the violence in our communities. We wanted to stress it because it’s not what people want to talk about all the time. We didn’t want to make it so that it was bringing back any bad memories, but more just addressing what’s going on.”

To help the students build the exhibit, entitled “Guns, Youth & Architecture,” professional and student groups offered their services over the course of several workshops, said Simon Hare, program manager of The Designery. Workers from local architecture firm Studio Luz, designers from Stew Design Workshop and work-study students from Wentworth Institute of Technology all came in to mentor Syverain and her fellow students and help them make their vision a reality.

“We tried to bring in practicing professionals to be there to offer their experience and insight,” said Hare. “So this project was a mix of trying to look at the issue, and trying to design this thing and decide how to implement it.”

For the professionals lending their hands, the project was about helping kids find an artistic outlet.



Students Dennis Decléments (right) and Ricardo Rosa work during a Fall Cycle workshop at YouthBuild Boston’s Designery in Roxbury. Throughout February, The Designery is hosting “Guns, Youth & Architecture,” a unique exhibit created by city students taking an artistic approach to dealing with gun violence. (Simon Hare photo)

“The reason we decided to donate our time ... was because I too felt that something needed to be done after watching the news everyday and hearing about another young life taken away by a bullet,” wrote Hansy Better Barraza, principal of Studio Luz, in an e-mail. “The teenagers were raising consciousness, and what I enjoyed the most was seeing them participating and doing something about it and working with the arts.”

For one display, the students painted lawn chairs to illustrate the plight of fellow youth in the city. One chair, entitled “Bricks of Freedom, Blood of the Dead,” alludes to friends in prison and bloodshed in the streets. Another called “Where’s the Peace?” symbolizes the struggle of urban youth with drugs and violence on a day-to-day basis.

Beside the chairs stands a wall of words and illustrations. Visitors are encouraged to contribute their own drawings or written thoughts on sticky notes that read, “Ask a question, leave a thought, think about it, design a solution.” Some of the notes offer a not-so-subtle knock at those who might have information about a murder, but are too afraid of retaliation to come forward — “In the case of violence, silence is acceptance.”

“As somebody who sees violence from a youth point of view, I think you have to ask yourself the question: Are you part of the problem, or part of the solution?” said Syverain. “I hear people say all the time that they want the violence to stop, but it’s just continually going on.

“If we just take a stand and say, ‘You know what, if I see something, I’m going to call somebody ... If I know someone who might be thinking about doing something, let me inform somebody about it,’” she continued. “And that’s the problem: people are a little scared to tell the cops anything. I think if people just stood up and stopped being so scared, there would be a lot less violence in the community.”

The main exhibit is a striking homage to last year’s victims.

The students hung a map of Boston on the wall and, one by one, marked the exact locations of all 47 shooting deaths that took place last year. From each point, they extended a long piece of string to the rafters, which they then hung down above the floor. A ring of rigid construction paper attached to each piece of string holds a rolled-up piece of paper with the name, age and exact street location of every shooting homicide that took place last year.

Some of those names are well known to Ricardo Rosa, a Madison Park High senior and member of YouthBuild for the past year-and-a-half.

“I knew a couple people who were shot and killed,” Rosa said. “It happens every year. Somebody I know, a friend. Two years ago, a friend on my basketball team was stabbed to death. A year ago, my friend’s brother got shot outside his own house.



One of the central pieces of the “Guns, Youth & Architecture” exhibit is its interactive “idea wall,” made up of cards with text prompting visitors to “Think about it, leave a thought, ask a question, design a solution.” The students who designed the exhibit filled in half of the cards in advance, leaving the rest for inspired visitors. (Simon Hare photo)

“So we were thinking, instead of forgetting about them, let’s figure out a way to remember. Let’s make it a bigger issue and see if people start to step up and do something about it.”

To the students, the names on those rolled-up pieces of paper represent a start, the first steps in the process of humanizing an issue that has caused furious uproar in the community. But they also realize that stemming violence requires an understanding of its underpinnings.

To gain a better perspective, YouthBuild students recently visited the Boston Police headquarters to see how law enforcement deals with shooting violence.

“They have pinpoint sensors around big hotspots in Boston, and they pick up every gunshot,” Rosa said. “We were there one day and they played back what was picked up [the day before] — eight gunshots in a row. It wasn’t like it happened a month or two ago; it [had] happened just yesterday. And it wasn’t just a guy trying to shoot once and drive away. He shot to try to kill somebody.”

Hare, who will soon leave YouthBuild to focus on developing more conscientious and socially responsible architectural design throughout the city, has a unique perspective on the culture of violence in Dorchester, Roxbury and Mattapan.

“The way our cities are designed may very well have something to do with the way these gun incidents happen,” Hare said. “What does the fact that this area, Lower Roxbury, has the highest density of housing projects have to do with the high number of gun issues in the area?”

Hare says that according to youth workers at the South End/Lower Roxbury Youth Workers Alliance, the young people who live in housing projects have a different perception of where they’re from.

“They don’t associate themselves as being from Boston or Roxbury or the South End,” Hare continued. “They say, ‘I’m from this housing project,’ or this one. The youth workers helped show us all the invisible divisions within the housing projects, and that each project is essentially ‘fighting’ the other.

“It’s a layer in the map that the city doesn’t use, but has such a huge effect,” he continued.

“People usually have a very limited perspective of the city. This map is to try to get people to think out of their normal path from home to work and back again.”

In the end, these students just want people in the community to do what they can to stem the tide of violence in 2008. Whether that means an anonymous tip to police, or keeping small children out of harm’s way to avoid another tragedy, everyone can do their part to help.

“We want the community to be more aware of the problem,” Rosa said. “It’s not just about your own family — imagine if it was your friend. Without people talking to each other in a community, it’s not really a community at all.”

“Guns, Youth & Architecture” runs through Feb. 21 at The Designery at YouthBuild Boston, 1884 Washington Street, Roxbury. For more information on the exhibit or other Designery programs, call 617-989-0408 or e-mail program manager Simon Hare at simon@thedesignery.org.