

'Hip-Hop Haven' touches at-Risk youth in Indianapolis

The Friday night outreach held in a church sanctuary draws some 400 youth from a high-crime community

Haughville, Ind., has been called one of the most run-down, crime-infested neighborhoods of Indianapolis. In 1997, the Indianapolis Police Department's (IPD) West District reported 2,589 violent crimes in the area, including homicides, robberies, rapes, aggravated assaults and burglaries.

Late at night gunshots can be heard in the distance. According to one resident, Haughville is "where all the crack houses are."

Amid this seemingly hopeless neighborhood, Roger Holloway—pastor of Haughville's Cityhill Church—felt in August 1998 what he called "birthing pains." With a group of pastors from Westside Ministries, he started walking the streets surrounding his church every Friday night at 10 o'clock.

After a nine-month vigil, during which Holloway admits he had a few "scary" experiences, he had learned some "street etiquette." He also had learned that kids had nothing to do and no place to go on Friday nights.

In May 1999, Holloway's "birthing pains" resulted in the Hip-Hop Haven, a Friday-night youth outreach held in his church sanctuary. Holloway's program provides a safe environment for nearly 400 kids, ages 8-15. He gives away food and drink and offers kids the use of 10 televisions equipped with a variety of nonviolent video games.

Holloway is a former radio disc jockey and has equipped his church with a \$50,000 sound system. From 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. at the church strobe lights and a fog machine are turned on and Christian hip-hop music is played. Adamant that no "dirty dancing" is allowed, Holloway brings in a guest speaker each week—a celebrity, an inspirational speaker or a Bible preacher. He has devoted one entire room of the church to the younger kids and outfitted it with coloring books and crayons.

"It's a place to be fed and to be loved. It's a place to meet the kids at their level with hip-hop culture. It's a place to hang out, to get them off the inner-city streets during that window of time," Holloway said. "It's a place of recreation yet still a place to have boundaries. It's a safe haven."

Holloway's efforts were recognized by more than one organization offering grass-roots money. He received \$3,425 in federal money through the Community Centers of Indianapolis, which contracted with him to provide a one-time Saturday night program "to get youths off the street."

Former Indianapolis Mayor Steven Goldsmith donated \$4,975 from The Community Enhancement Fund to help fund the Hip-Hop Haven. Goldsmith, now in Washington, D.C., caught President Bush's attention by fostering an atmosphere of encouragement for community grassroots organizations by providing small grants and technical assistance.

IPD statistics show that Holloway's efforts possibly have had a direct bearing on relieving the local crime. In 2000, violent crimes in Haughville had dropped to 2,262 from 2,589 in 1997. IPD Deputy Chief Timothy Horthy insists that Holloway's ministry has helped reduce crime in Haughville.

“The Hip-Hop Haven is a police and church partnership that works,” Horthy said. “When a police officer walks in, the kids clap and give them a standing ovation. He teaches the kids how to respect a church worship space and to respect the police at the same time. And I think my officers have learned a lot about giving these kids respect.”

Olgen Williams, president of the Haughville Neighborhood Association and executive director of the Christamore House, a community center established in Indianapolis in 1905, says Holloway’s greatest ministry is “just staying in the neighborhood.”

“Roger is a committed person. He’s a go-getter. He’s taken the church God’s blessed him with and he’s servicing the community. The kids get attached to the program. I know my kids love to jump in the car and go there,” Williams said.

“Roger’s good at it, partly because he was a former DJ at WTLC, a black radio station, for years,” Williams added. “He was one of the best—for a white boy. He has no fear in working with a diverse group of people. You’ve got 600 kids a month who are doing something positive. That’s great.”

Holloway said a Hip-Hop Haven can be started with an initial investment of \$500 to \$50,000 and operated on a shoestring budget. The key, he insists, is the 50 to 60 volunteers he relies on each week.

“This is very labor-intensive,” Holloway said. “These kids test you. This is the hardest thing I do all week.”

James Ward, 15, says the Hip-Hop Haven has changed his life.

“They teach us not to have sex before we’re married—give us good information about all the transmitted diseases going around—to stay in school, do the right thing and don’t do drugs,” Ward said.

Carol Shepard in Indianapolis