

# MY PERSONAL PLAN TO STOP THE VIOLENCE

By **LINDA S. WALLACE**

**P**ERHAPS THE MOST painful thing I've had to do this year is accept how my actions contribute to Philadelphia's steadily rising murder rate.

I don't have a criminal record nor am I an elected official. In the 17 years I've lived here, I've never even gotten a parking ticket. So why am I putting myself on the hot seat?

Because it's a behavior pattern this city's children need to learn. Many of them, like many grown-ups, lack the tools to look inside themselves for solutions.

Our youth need guidance and leadership from adults who model civil and compassionate behavior. They need to watch adults calmly discuss complex problems, settle arguments and resolve conflicts. This is a city that has not taught its children well.

Philadelphia once had to set up a court at the Vet to deal with fans arrested for drunken or abusive behavior. As late as the '90s, the police maintained a group of officers who knocked on doors in neighborhoods undergoing racial transition to warn that violence and misbehavior wouldn't be tolerated.

Council members, mayors and governors have been less than exemplary role models for public department. Bickering, name-calling and even assaults have been part of the routine for conducting the public's business.

So before we gather to talk about what's wrong with teenag-

ers, and ask why they are so angry, we need to step back and look within for solutions.

Parents and guardians, elected officials, educators, the law-enforcement and criminal-justice communities, religious, business and civic leaders, unions, the media, and others must first examine how their own actions have contributed to the despair and anger in these neighborhoods.

Then, they need to come together to discuss the adjustments they'll make in order to advance inclusion, justice and equal opportunity. Think of it as a "Declaration of Interdependence." That is likely to be the most productive meeting held in Philadelphia since 1776.

I'll begin with my own observations and resolutions:

► For years, I intended to get more involved with schools and community organizations in my neighborhood and work with young adults. I finally kept that promise just weeks ago. I'll put the needs of my community higher on my priority list.

► Every day provides a golden opportunity to promote civility and nonviolence. Read the sites of local papers, and you'll find plenty of words that promote divisiveness, and hurt and injure others.

As far as I know, peace has never been negotiated by using abusive language. We must serve notice that these tactics will not be tolerated because they set a bad example for the children. Each of us must audit the words we



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speak and write to each other. I will measure the words and tone I use in conversations and e-mails and lead by example.

► A few years ago, a young black man began following me after I got off at the wrong subway station. He told me I was in a dangerous neighborhood. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm going to walk behind you to make sure you get home OK."

Along the way, we encountered a rowdy gang of teens. They began pointing at me and whispering. After seeing the young man walking behind me, they passed me by. As a community, we tend to punish the many for the misdeeds of the few.

Twice in the last 15 years,

young black males in Philadelphia have stepped up to help me when I encountered dangerous situations. The cultural shades we wear sometimes prevent us from appreciating our youth's strengths, resiliency and courage. We owe the decent and caring ones our respect and admiration. My daily actions will demonstrate that young men don't need to carry guns to gain my respect or acknowledgment.

► In 1954, the year I was born, the Supreme Court ruled against "separate but equal" in the landmark Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education case and signaled that the nation could undo past injustices. Many hoped that communities would integrate.

Approximately 50 years later, a survey by the National Conference for Community and Justice found that 36 percent of Americans polled felt it was OK for ethnic groups to remain separate as long as each had access to opportunity. Integrated schools were envisioned as a way to infuse middle-class values to people in low-income communities. Educational research now indicates that the socioeconomic status of schools is the most important indicator of student achievement. Low-income students who attend middle-class schools tend to perform better.

So when city schools aren't working, we can't just point fingers at lower-income families who have been left behind. Those middle- and upper-income families who fled the public schools played a role as we abandoned our commitment to equal schools. As an American, I'll engage in actions that reflect the interests of the larger community and not just my own cultural group.

In Philadelphia, heavily segregated communities compete for services, contracts and funding. This process is divisive and it teaches children to put self-interest ahead of all else.

That is a change that lies within each of us. ★

Linda S. Wallace writes an advice column on diversity called "The Cultural Coach" ([www.theculturalcoach.com](http://www.theculturalcoach.com)).