

PortlandTribune

Small steps reclaim one patch of city

'Connected' group answers call to stand against crime in Holladay Park

BY PETER KORN

The Portland Tribune, Sep 29, 2011

John Canda hasn't found his 100 men yet.

But that isn't stopping Canda and the few he has rallied from taking back a part of their neighborhood every Friday night.

In April, after 14-year-old Shiloh Hampton was shot and killed in Holladay Park, just south of Lloyd Center, Canda issued a call that some say was more of a calling out.

"I need 100 strong men who are not afraid to stand with me on the streets of Portland to talk with these youth who are robbing, stealing, selling drugs and killing! Who will stand with me? Mothers and aunts, please encourage the men you know!" Canda, a longtime leader in the Northeast Portland black community, posted on his Facebook page.

Last Friday evening, the group that has grown out of Canda's call to action held a barbecue in Holladay Park.

They call themselves Connected, and every Friday since Canda made his plea they have walked around and through Holladay Park from 4:30 to 10 p.m. They don't confront drug dealers and gang bangers v have in the past made Holladay Park their hangout. They engage them. They know better than to expect miracles.

They know that Holladay Park is one little piece of property in a section of the city that throughout summer months can feel like a war zone. They understand that one night each week is just one night each week, and it leaves plenty of other nights for violence and crime for those who still engage in it.

But the men and women gathered at Holladay Park believe they have made a difference, that they have changed something. They're not sure what exactly, but these are people who are good at taking things faith, who believe in small victories and are willing to appreciate signs, any signs, that larger ones may be in the offing.

A safe place

On Friday, Canda's 100 men were more like 15 or 20, not counting the half dozen uniformed Portland police officers on hand and a political luminary or two. Despite Canda's plea, the Friday night walkabouts often attract more women than men, and the numbers were close to even at the barbecue.

Canda has grown accustomed to this sort of response. In 2009 for seven days, four hours a day, he stood at the corner of Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Killingsworth Street with a sign that read, "Where are the fathers?"



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / TRIBUNE PHOTO
(From left) Rob Richardson, Pastor J.W. Matt Hanessee, Brenda Moon, Arizona Warren and Lar Allen patrol Northeast Portland's Holladay Park as members of Connected, a neighborhood watch group that formed after Shiloh Hampton was shot and killed there in April.

By the seventh day he had 35 to 40 people standing with him, he said. Almost all were women and children, not men. Here he was again this summer, rallying loyal followers he admits are frustratingly small in number.

Every one of the members of Connected who was present Friday night had their own small victory to talk about. Canda recalled a 17-year-old girl who was drunk on the southwest corner of the park on one of the group's first walkabouts. He said she was speaking loudly and "provocatively" with her friends.

"I told her how she was acting was disrespectful to herself and everyone who could hear her," Canda said.

The girl, he said, apologized and began to run across the MAX tracks to catch up with her friends, who had scattered. Canda reached out and grabbed her hand. He said if he hadn't she would have been hit by an oncoming train. She began to sob as she thanked Canda.

Small victories? "We're planting a seed," Canda said.

Connected board member Sam Sachs recalled one Friday night when he and others walked to a bench to say hello to a group of six to eight men who appeared to be playing chess. But it wasn't kings and rooks; the men were leaning over, it was baggies of drugs and cash. They ran as the Connected walkers approached.

Small victories? "People will know you can go to Holladay Park because you can be safe," Sachs said.

Wanda Rosenbarger, general manager of Lloyd Center Mall, attended Friday's barbecue in the park to express her appreciation to the walkers.

"Look at the park tonight," Rosenbarger said. "It looks like a place you want to be."

Rosenbarger talked about the gentle interactions of the Connected walkers, who mostly just say hello and strike up friendly conversations with park visitors. It takes a lot of faith to believe that such small exchanges matter in the larger scheme of things.

"These people believe it," Rosenbarger said.

Father's inspiration

Commander Mike Leloff, a longtime member of the Portland police gang enforcement team, came to Holladay Park Friday night, telling the gathered crowd that there has been a 22 percent decline in major crimes in the five-block Lloyd Center area this summer compared to last year. Leloff can't prove that the Friday night walkers are responsible. He is aware that citywide gang activity this year has been close to the record level established last year, but he said the walkers have to be at least part of the reason the Lloyd Center area has been safer.

"I truly believe they are having an impact," he said.

Arizona Warren, one of a group from Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church walking the perimeter of Holladay Park Friday night, recalled a young man smoking pot that the group came upon one night. At their habit, group members did not confront the young man, but instead asked how his day had gone where he went to school. The young man began to talk to them "very respectfully," Warren said. By the time the group had circled the park and returned to the spot, the young man had left.

Those sorts of encounters matter, said Gary Marschke, another Connected board member and Friday night regular, who said he's seen the gentle speech of the walkers turn hostile attitudes into something closer to respect a number of times.

"I think we're altering the model for engaging with our young folks that are at risk or in trouble, from observe, report and enforce, to engage and care," he said.

Pat Callahan, senior deputy district attorney who is prosecuting the two men arrested in the Shiloh Hampton shooting, is willing to consider the ripple effects of small acts, and the virtue of those willing engage in them.

“Who knows that something they say to someone on Friday prevents something from happening on Saturday,” Callahan said. “We should be praising these guys for showing up and trying to make a difference, and asking ourselves why aren’t we there?”

Marlene Sails was at the park on Friday, dancing with a couple of girlfriends. If there are those who question whether the Holladay Park walkers really make a difference to the black youth of Portland, consider Sails, 20-year-old daughter of Connected regular Maury Sails.

Marlene said someday she intends to become a teacher. She wants to work against violence in the community and she is inspired – by her own father—who walks Holladay Park every Friday evening.

“I am proud to have a father who wants to make a change,” Sails said. “I want to make a change.”

Sails said her father’s Friday evening walkabouts have taught her a lesson.

“When you want something done you can’t wait for others to do it for you,” she said.

A lot of names

There was music, and dancing, and an unmistakable feeling of fellowship in Holladay Park Friday night, of people believing in their work, and each other. But it was hard not to notice those who were there, the rest of John Canda’s 100. Connected members made a presentation to the neighborhood association in Northeast Portland’s Sullivan’s Gulch area, hoping they could get something similar started there, or at least recruit more walkers for Holladay Park. Canda said he had more than 600 Facebook friends in April, when he challenged the men of his community to make a stand with him. Now he has more than 1,200. Yet so few are here tonight.

Carl Goodman, a Connected board member, sat alone at a table as the sun was setting, thinking about how many men had shown up at the beginning of summer but then disappeared as their commitment faded away.

“He got a lot of names,” Goodman said of Canda. “But they’re not here.”

Still, Goodman, who oversees probation and parole as director of adult services for Multnomah County Department of Community Justice, knows the importance of recognizing small victories, and faith, as well as anyone.

“We have to do something,” Goodman said. “The community has to do something, and we’re demonstrating what can be done. So whether or not we make a major difference, if we make a small difference we believe we’re successful and it’s worth it. What we have done is pushed the criminal act out of Holladay Park,” he said. “Holladay was turning into a cesspool.”

Someone asked Goodman what it would take for more men to show up. His answer may have been the most sobering words spoken on a night full of good cheer and hope.

“Probably another murder,” he said.