

Rec Night Program Highlights

- **Started in February 2008**
- **Meets weekly from 6-9 at Madeleine Rogers Recreation Center in Smith Hill (and at Davis Park in the summer months)**
- **75 youth from the Smith Hill neighborhood and Chad Brown Housing Project participate**
- **An average of 15 adult staff and volunteers participate on a weekly basis**
- **Is intended to be a consistent, safe space for youth that encourages relationship building between youth and positive adults**
- **Is intended to be a “hub” for connecting youth with positive adults and experiences that can reduce violence and increase resilience for youth and their communities.**
- **Activities are basic: basketball, table and board games, break-dancing, tutoring as requested, pizza**
- **Operates as a partnership of the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence, Providence College’s Feinstein Institute for Public Service, the Smith Hill Community Development Corporation and the Providence Recreation Department, with assistance from the Providence Police.**

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Rec Night Overview

The activity at the heart of the Rec Night program is simple: one evening each week, 75-80 youth from the Smith Hill neighborhood and the Chad Brown housing project gather at a local park or at Rogers Recreation Center in the Smith Hill neighborhood of Providence for sports, games, break dancing, conversation and pizza. Nearly all the youth attending are gang affiliated.

Each week, in addition to the youth, an average of 15-18 adults participate: 3-4 Streetworkers of the Nonviolence Institute (many of them ex-gang members trained in nonviolence and youth development), 10 or more faculty and students of Providence College, 5-6 adults from Smith Hill and two staff of Rogers Rec. The police maintain a presence as needed, typically dropping in once or twice an evening.

Rec Night is the result of a collaborative effort of the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence (ISPN), the Feinstein Institute for Public Service, the Smith Hill Community Development Corporation, the Providence Recreation Department and the Providence Police. The Feinstein Institute and ISPN are the lead organizers. This program was begun in February of 2008.

Profile of youth in the program

Participants in Rec Night range from 13 to 24, but 85 percent are between 16 and 19 years old. Approximately 75 percent of participants are male. Roughly one-third of the participants are African American, one-third Hispanic, one-quarter Asian American (mostly Laotian American), and the remainder white. Most of the youth participating in the program are gang members or are gang affiliated. They are, with few exceptions, economically poor. About half have dropped out of school or are struggling to stay in school. Many have been a victim of and/or participated in significant violence, ranging from beat downs to shooting.

Context: Undoing Violentization and Increasing Resilience

Undoing Violentization

“Violentization” is the formal term for a four-stage process that individuals undergo as they become capable of deliberate violence directed at other persons. The majority of youth in Rec Night have undergone at least the first in this four-stage process as described by sociologist Lonnie Athens. That is, they have been hurt or humiliated by someone in their community, or forced to witness or participate in the humiliation or injury of someone close to them. This type of trauma, particularly if it occurs with some regularity, forms the basis for the decision many of the youth make about the need to protect themselves and others from harm, and to consider membership in a gang or crew. It teaches, as well, that physical force is as important or more important than “civil” (talk, compromise, mediation) methods in resolving conflict.

Additionally, those youth that are gang members have typically undergone the second and third stages of violentization: they have resolved to use violence as necessary (stage two), and they have acted on this resolve enough times that it has become a part of their personal identity (stage three): they are recognized for their aggressiveness, fearlessness and ability to fight, and for their membership with a group that will back this up.

While there is certainly more to gang membership than this description of violentization entails, it is the goal of the Rec Night program to help start a process of intervening in and reversing violentization in multiple ways: giving youth opportunities to identify their emotions and responses to violent trauma; modeling and making available to the youth “civil” methods of resolving conflict; and connecting youth to “civil communities” that will support them in developing and achieving longer term goals.

The trauma the youth experience can also surface as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): feelings of stress, recurring, unwelcome thoughts, unfocused anger and irritability, depression, sleeplessness, a sense of emotional or social isolation; and unhealthy strategies for managing those symptoms such as drug and alcohol use/abuse, high-risk sexual activity, and fighting and oppositional behavior.

Rec Night’s approach to “undoing” violentization is not therapeutic, however. That is, it is not based on individual counseling or formal training. While we try to refer individual youth to counseling and other services as appropriate, Rec Night itself simply affirms the youth as members of a civil community in a safe space, models civil ways of resolving conflict, connects youth with adults who have themselves traded violence for nonviolence, and acts as a hub connecting youth to other opportunities that will contribute to their resilience, such as conflict mediation, GED programs, summer jobs programs, leadership and service opportunities, and programs such as Youth Build or City Year.

Increasing Individual and Community Resilience

Resilience is an overarching concept that refers to the ability of an individual or a community to survive and thrive despite threatening and stressful changes in the external environment. For the most part, neither the individual youth participating in Rec Night nor their communities are resilient enough to thrive in the face of the stressors and changes that affect them, such as physical violence, rising unemployment, high-cost, low-quality housing and failing schools. It is worth noting that Providence is the third poorest city in the United States for children and youth.

Youth resilience

For individual youth, resilience means the ability to persist during adversity. The literature on resilience in youth points to a set of “protective factors” that predict resilience: pro-social bonding, clear boundaries, life skills, caring and support, high expectations and meaningful participation.

These protective factors are not “taught” to or inculcated in youth. They are experiences that youth must have in enough depth and over a long enough period of time that they internalize them as values and behaviors, and become a cultural “system” for interacting with the world. Given the situation of most of the youth participating in Rec Night, this is a long process, marked more by plateaus and sharp rises or falls than steady, incremental progress.

We believe, however, that the fundamental building block and unit of change is relationship – connecting the youth to positive adults in a larger social setting; helping the youth negotiate their peer relationships more successfully and without resort to violence; and helping the youth to make the steps connecting them to other social networks (nonviolence training or summer jobs, for example) that require new attitudes and skills.

ISPN staff, Streetworkers and youth workers are the key to the success of rec night. These people are from the same communities and backgrounds as the youth, and the youth are able and willing to trust them as guides and mentors. They “keep contact” with the youth, and introduce them to other adult volunteers, model positive behaviors and options and, with the assistance of other individual volunteers and agencies, connect the youth to opportunities that expand their skills and social networks. Rec night is a gateway for youth trying to leave violence behind, trying to renegotiate institutional systems that have not worked for them, and trying to remain hopeful that things can get better.

Community Resilience

For communities, resilience points toward the ability of a larger, “public” community, such as a neighborhood or city, to provide its members with access to the physical and social resources necessary for a good quality of life: formal and informal education and learning; support in times of illness, injury and suffering; opportunities to celebrate and connect to others; and opportunities for a livelihood that will provide adequate food, clothing and shelter and is meaningful to the worker and the community. In a healthy community, the activity in each of these four subsystems reinforces the activity of the other three, contributing to the overall well being of the system (or community) as a whole.

At the neighborhood level, indicators of community resilience are thought to be: neighbors that trust one another; neighbors that interact with one another on a regular basis; residents who own their houses and stay for awhile; residents who work together and are involved in the common good; residents who have a sense of community and cohesion; and the existence of formal and informal civic places for gathering (such as parks, rec centers, schools open to the community, community centers).

The “social capital” that is represented by these indicators allows a community to respond to and persist despite threats to the community as a whole or the systems through which it operates. Examples affecting Smith Hill would include violence and

robbery; unemployment (official unemployment in Smith Hill, March 2010, is 16 percent; unofficial, local community estimates are closer to 30 percent), and large-scale foreclosures of absentee-owned properties. Historically (and at present) Smith Hill is a community that is periodically overwhelmed by these external pressures – often the first to feel economic pressures, for example, and the last to recover. All of its systems are under significant stress, and the future goal of nearly all youth, and most of their families, is to leave the neighborhood.

Youth and Community Resilience

There are key leverage points in the lives of the youth and the local community that have the potential to effect positive change. Some of these are: school completion and success; development of skills and knowledge that enlarge possibilities and worldview beyond the neighborhood; stable, secure living environment; consistent access to positive adults; sense of hope in the future; affirmation as a unique individual within a meaningful social group. Each of these possibilities calls for strategies that simultaneously support individual youth and strengthen the systems of education, health, creativity and livelihood through institutions such as schools, community and rec centers, employment, housing, healthcare.

Rec night cannot pretend to do all of this work, let alone do it at a deep level. But it can and does work to create through its partners the social relationships and shared vision of thriving youth and strong community, and it does help the Rec Center fulfill its potential as a community space.

Method

Rec Night is intended to start a process of integrating youth into a supportive community over time; to contribute to the resilience of individual youth over time; and to strengthen the communities in which the youth live, again over time. With these goals in mind, the program emphasizes two practices: building relationships between the youth and positive adults on a consistent basis; and introducing youth to positive opportunities. “Positive” as it is used here means interactions that have the potential to lead to greater resilience.

The literature on youth and community resilience points strongly to the need for youth to have opportunities for relationships with positive adults, and access to multiple opportunities in which they can develop personal identity and caring relationships, clarify values and make meaning, and develop vocational competency.

Rec Night starts by offering youth who are high-risk and whose lives are often unsettled a dependable safe space. In its first two years of operation, working with youth from multiple gangs and crews in a shared space, Rec Night has only had two physical altercations: one punch thrown during a basketball game, and one person pepper-sprayed in the parking lot by someone who was not a participant. And, since this program began, police report that incidences of violence and vandalism are down in the neighborhood. Rec Night allows ISPN’s Streetworkers to identify and

mediate emerging conflicts more easily. The youth have a greater number of positive adults consistently in their lives, and a growing number of the youth have been steered towards positive activities such as GED and summer jobs programs. Through Rec Night, youth participate in additional programs at Providence College, go to college basketball games, are invited to a bi-weekly “movie night” at Providence Place Mall, and participate in nonviolence and leadership programs of ISPN and other organizations.

Management and Finance

Through December 2009, this program was run as a completely volunteer effort, with time and in-kind resources donated by the partner organizations. The only continuing out-of-pocket expense has been the approximately \$4000 per year spent on pizza. The Feinstein Institute managed to pay for this, but had no official budget for doing so. Decisions about the program are currently made at bi-weekly meetings of representatives from the key partners; and reports and advice are sought at larger meetings that occur approximately every six months. These larger meetings, organized by the Smith Hill CDC, include public officials and community leaders in addition to representatives of the lead organizations.

Despite its small budget, the impact and potential of the program were great enough that ISPN committed a half-time organizer to work with youth from Smith Hill and Chad Brown, with Rec Night as the “hub” activity. With financial assistance from an anonymous donor to the Feinstein Institute, the organizer was moved from half to full-time. In addition to coordinating rec night he does gang intervention work, accompanies youth through the judicial system, provides support to families and creates other development opportunities for neighborhood youth. As are most of the direct service staff of ISPN, this coordinator is from the neighborhood in which he works and is an ex-gang member who has committed himself to nonviolence. In addition, managers at the Chad Brown Housing Project and the Boy’s and Girls Club have invited the Feinstein Institute and ISPN to help develop a new program for rec night youth at the housing project’s recreation center. We expect this addition will attract many of the same youth for a second night, as well as a number of new faces, running at approximately 30-40 youth and 10-15 additional volunteers each week.

The ISPN organizer coordinator also works as a coach and guide for faculty, students and staff of the Feinstein Institute.

Rec Night Outcomes

The outcomes are measured with simple written surveys conducted at the end of the program or in six-month increments, and where appropriate through feedback sessions with participants and the verbal and written reflections of volunteers.

Rogers Recreation Center

- Average of 75 youth per week
- 80 percent of youth in gangs or gang-affiliated

- Average 3 staff of the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence per week
- Average 3 adult volunteers from the neighborhood per week; each of them attends 90 percent of the weekly events in each 12-month cycle
- Average 8 Providence College student volunteers per week; each of them attends 90 percent of the weekly events during the semester of their involvement; 70 percent continue for second semester and/or summer.
- Average 1 Providence College faculty member per week; attends 90 percent of the weekly events in 12-month period.
- 90 percent of participants will indicate that they feel safe at Rec Night all the time
- 90 percent of participants will indicate that they recognize the ISPN staff and volunteers as positive people to be around
- 70 percent of participants will indicate that Rec Night connected them to additional positive opportunities (such as tutoring, summer jobs programs, sports leagues, volunteer programs)

Chad Brown project (still in development)

- Average of 30-40 youth per week in a more structured program
- 80 percent of youth in gangs or gang-affiliated
- Average 2 staff of the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence per week
- Average 2 adult volunteers from the neighborhood per week; each of them attends 90 percent of the weekly events in each 12 month cycle
- Average 8 Providence College student volunteers per week; each of them attends 90 percent of the weekly events during the semester of their involvement; 70 percent continue for second semester and/or summer.
- Average 1 Providence College faculty member per week; attends 80 percent of the weekly events in 12-month period.
- 90 percent of participants will indicate that they feel safe at Chad Brown Rec Night all the time
- 90 percent of participants will indicate that they recognize the ISPN staff and volunteers as positive people to be around
- 70 percent of participants will indicate that Rec Night connected them to additional positive opportunities (such as tutoring, summer jobs programs, sports leagues, volunteer programs)