

The Redeemed Spirit of Stanley Tookie Williams

Dortell Williams

December 13, 2007 marked the second anniversary of the execution of Stanley Tookie Williams. He must not be forgotten, and his anti-gang efforts and labours for peace should be hailed as nothing short of remarkable. In light of a three part study commissioned by the Los Angeles City Council in 2006 to track the efforts of gang deterrence, his work is especially relevant. According to the study¹, close to \$90 million spent on gang suppression has failed to prevent an estimated 40,000 residents from joining the ranks of gangs. This failure helped gang-related crimes, including homicides, reach a zenith of nearly 4,000 incidents.

The study, co-authored by the venerable Connie Rice of the *Advancement Project*, a non-profit organization aimed at making public systems and servants accountable to low income residents, says most of the money went towards arrests and imprisonment. This policy has only fueled the current plague of inhumane, needless prison overcrowding we keep hearing so much about. Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton has already said, “We can’t arrest our way out of this problem.”²

Yet, just hours after Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger denied clemency to Williams, Bratton and Sheriff Lee Baca held a press conference to announce the implementation of the “Community Law Enforcement and Recovery” (CLEAR) program, funded by the U.S. Justice Department. To local residents, that meant more arrests, less social intervention. According to the study, they were right.³

In stark contrast to Williams’ successful peace and **prevention** approach, the law enforcement community stays the course on a destructive path towards youth criminalization. There is no doubt Williams, a three time Nobel Peace Prize nominee, and recipient of the “2005 President’s Call to Service Award”, had a better way.

Williams’ approach to the gang crisis was to call the various gang sects to truces; fostering mutual understanding and forgiveness, and bridging the various violent rival rifts. He accomplished this life-saving advocacy through his popular website, “Internet Project for Street Peace”, a series of anti-gang children’s books, and disseminated telephone recordings of his message to unite. His effectiveness cannot be denied. Days before the Governor’s clemency decision, on at least three occasions rival gang members united in droves to offer up their weapons of death in exchange for his life.⁴ Williams walked in their shoes of alienation and marginalization, so even his old enemies could relate to him and accept his message of peace.

Thanks to the internet, Williams' message was heard around the globe.⁵ In appreciation for turning their lives around and to validate his effectiveness, both children and adults world-wide praised his work. Prior to his execution, fervent young voices, from as far away as the Netherlands, Brazil, El Salvador, Australia and other places where our poisonous policies have pushed the destruction of gang-banging, pleaded for his life.⁶ The sweet global voices of precious children floated in the ether amongst the strong and courageous echo of even our troops in Iraq, pleading for clemency.

Wow! Think about that. Williams moved the world with his approach of peace and prevention, while law enforcement terrorizes communities already suffering from chaos by trying to arrest, imprison and even shoot their way out of an ever stubborn, generational cycle of internecine violence.

Williams was convicted in a very suspect trial for the murders of four people in 1979. He vehemently denied involvement throughout his incarceration, even until the moment they stuck the deadly needle into his arm. He admitted that he co-founded the Crips Street gang. He also admitted that he deeply lamented his creation and worked hard from the oppressive confines of his cell to counter that mistake.

Yet I often wonder about those who stifle responsible gun legislation needed to stop the rivers of blood flowing regularly in our streets. Uncontrolled guns often aid and exacerbate the threat of gangs. I also question the policies of those who deny drug treatment and meaningful rehabilitation for prisoners and others who desperately need it, when these methods have been proven to reduce crime and decrease victimization. Furthermore, I cannot help but be disappointed when the Bush administration pushes for a patient strategy of "changing the hearts and minds" of those who threaten us abroad, but insists on a completely opposite course for our own here at home. It is easy to assign blame to Williams for the unforeseen level of destruction his creation helped spawn, but it does not take much to also wonder if those in power are any better for the foreseeable negative consequences of their wayward policies.

The spirit of Williams and his ardent life saving push for prevention must live on through all of us who recognize that peace cannot be attained through force and violence. That is one of the main reasons the Iraq War has failed, and as such, in both situations, too many precious lives are being lost.

Long live the redeemed spirit of Stanley Tookie Williams.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bihm, Jennifer. "Council Study Says Gang Intervention Failing". *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 10 – 16, 2006: p. A1, A18.
- ² Bratton, William. "We can't arrest our way out of this problem." *KTLA-5 News*, June 3, 2004.
- ³ Bihm, Jennifer. *op.cit.*
- ⁴ Periera, Pablo. "Gangs Offer to Turn in Guns to Save Williams". *ABC 7 Eyewitness News*, December 7, 2005. Williams, Colleen. "Gangs Seek Truce, Offer Guns to Spare Williams". *NBC 4 News*, December 10, 2005. *Los Angeles Sentinel*. "Gang Leader Supports Clemency", December 15, 2005, p. A19.
- ⁵ Smiley, Tavis. *KCET/PBS*, November 29, 2005.
- ⁶ Becnel, Barbara, guest of Sonali Kolhatkar on "Uprising". *Pacifica Network's KPFK 90.7 FM*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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