

From gang life to college, one paycheck at a time

A unique Boston program will pay gang members to renounce crime and focus on getting a college degree.

By **Josh Kenworthy**, Staff writer | MAY 24, 2017

Tony Franklin was fresh off a 10-year prison sentence for assaulting a police officer. As he walked into court to see his probation officer he was “down and out,” he says.

As a former gang member from Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood, Mr. Franklin was standing at what experts identify as a crossroads: He could resort to his former means of making money on the streets, or he could walk in a new direction.

With a son on the way and bills to pay, Franklin says there were times he would break down, not knowing what to do. But prison had been an “eye-opener” for Franklin, he says, and he wanted to “do good.” He needed a circuit breaker.

It came in the form of Ismail Abdurrashid, a charismatic community figure and teacher at College Bound Dorchester (CBD), an organization designed to give at-risk youth the wraparound supports and education needed to go to college.

“He just came out of nowhere like, ‘oh, excuse me, this college program is willing to help you with everything you need right now,’” Franklin says.

Specifically, that program was CBD’s flagship, Boston Uncornered, which, after a brief pilot, recently had its hard launch. Over the next three years, it aims to serve 600 of Boston’s 2,600 gang members and to have 250 enroll in college. The program recruits the most influential gang members, gives them a \$400 per week stipend to renounce gang life and focus exclusively on their education, and then mentors and assists them, guiding them through the maze of financial aid applications, and teaching them life lessons like how to shop and pay their bills – whatever it takes to get them into and through college.



Tony Franklin works on his speech at College Bound Dorchester (CBD) ahead of the non-profit’s annual gala, Tuesday, May 16, 2017. Mr. Franklin was incarcerated for a decade before he was recruited to be part of CBD’s flagship program, Boston Uncornered, which recruits and pays former gang members to prepare for and go to college. He plans to enroll to study sociology at Bunker Hill Community College in the fall. (Josh Kenworthy/The Christian Science Monitor)

Given the long-running debate in the United States over the merits of prison education, Boston Uncornered's approach is potentially controversial. CBD's chief executive officer Mark Culliton says it's a first-in-the-nation program because it demands a major shift in thinking: moving from seeing the most disruptive gang members – “core influencers” – as the central problem, to seeing them as part of the solution.

The idea of gang members as a force for good isn't entirely new, say some gang experts and researchers, but Boston Uncornered's high expectations, including college access for this demographic, represent a unique approach.

“The Boston Uncornered Program is cutting edge; a fresh, welcomed approach to resolving the issue of gangs, poverty, crime, and hopelessness,” says Lisa Taylor-Austin, a national and international gang expert at the Taylor-Austin Group, which specializes in counseling members of criminal street gangs.

Ms. Taylor-Austin says that of the myriad different intervention and suppression programs, she has not seen a program as comprehensive as Boston Uncornered since the founding of Homeboy Industries in the 1980s. Homeboy offers mentoring, pays participants a stipend or hourly rate, and includes apprentice programs in silk screening, baking, and solar panel installation. But she says Uncornered is unique because it gets students to a college-level education, which allows them to build careers, not just get jobs. This, she says, should have a ripple effect as successful former gang members reach out to their communities, especially gang involved and at-risk youth.



Alex Diaz (l.), Cisco Depina (c.), and Tony Franklin (r.) stand outside the headquarters of non-profit College Bound Dorchester (CBD) in Dorchester, Mass., Tuesday, May 16, 2017. After a promising pilot, CBD recently launched a program recruit influential gang members, paying them a weekly stipend to prepare them for college attend college. JOSH KENWORTHY/THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Statistics on shootings and homicides in Boston emphasize the need for such a solution. According to CBD, one percent of the city's gang-involved youth have been responsible for more than half of all homicides in the last five years. Nationally, gang-related violence continues to rise across the nation, even as overall violence declines.

CBD has been building the concept over the last four years. A pilot program with 40 students, says CBD, has shown enough promise over the last six months for the organization to believe it's worth expanding. Of the 40 students in the program, 85 percent have not been reincarcerated for a criminal sentence, 78 percent have persisted in the program, and 21 students – more than half – are currently enrolled in college. Students come into the program at different stages. Some already have their GEDs, while others are working towards their high school equivalency or taking some remedial classes.

The vital ingredient in the success of this program, Taylor-Austin and others say, is a gang member's desire to change.

"In my work with gang involved youth I never met a gang member who didn't want a job, a paycheck and legitimate career," Taylor-Austin says. "This program is unique in that it offers all of these options." In Franklin's case, at 31 years old, he says, he was raring to go. He says he had reached the point where he was no longer blaming all his bad actions on his childhood with his caring, but often neglectful, drug-addicted mother and grandmother.

During his decade in prison he completed his GED, read books, and wrote poetry. If he can pass one remedial math class, he will be ready to begin studies in sociology at Bunker Hill Community College in the fall. Eventually, he says, he'd like to work as a motivational speaker for kids.

"We're not supposed to make it, we're going against all odds, but a lot of us, given the right opportunity we'll grow," he says, likening himself and his colleagues to Tupac Shakur's song about the rose that grew from the concrete.

One of Franklin's peers, Alex Diaz, also seems to be seizing the opportunity with both hands. At 30, Mr. Diaz has already tried it the hard way. Deeply frustrated in high school, he says, he dropped out in ninth grade and started running the streets with a crew committing felonies, including armed robbery and kidnapping. Eventually, he was incarcerated in an upstate prison at age 17.

It was Cisco Depina who was key in recruiting Diaz to the Boston Uncornered program. Mr. Depina, who grew up on the streets with Diaz and used to sell drugs before enrolling at CBD in 2006, now works for CBD, recruiting, mentoring, and supporting students. Depina got to Diaz in that crucial window following his release, offering to drive him to school, take him shopping – anything to keep him on track.

"What we've learned is one, that you can find [core influencers], and two they'll come and work with you if you hire the right people," Culliton says. "You hire former gang members, folks with a shared experience, and you train them in trauma informed conversations.... If you set high expectations, if you help them through the process, their trajectory changes, they move from the corner to college to graduation."



Alex Diaz (r.) gives his speech at the College Bound Dorchester annual gala with his daughter (l.) by his side, Thursday, May 18, 2017. Mr. Diaz plans to attend Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology to study automotive technology in the fall. JOSH KENWORTHY/THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Yet Culliton admits that working with this demographic is not easy. He recalls how during an earlier pilot involving seven influential gang members who already had their GEDs, the student deemed most likely to succeed took the money and ran. And Taylor-Austin says it will be key that the program closely monitors students to ensure that only those who stick to the tenets of the program keep getting paid.

But while the \$12-\$15 an hour these former gang members are getting paid might sound steep, the economic rationale stacks up, according to Culliton. CBD figures suggest a “core influencer” costs Massachusetts around \$53,000 per year, (the national average is \$100,000 per year) for things like incarceration and probation, compared to roughly \$30,000 a year for the program. CBD estimates the program will cost \$18 million over three years, funded mostly by private philanthropy plus about \$1.4 million in public grants. So far program officials have raised about \$4.8 million.

Calculating costs can be “tricky,” according to Ben Struhl, a policy analyst from MIT’s Poverty Action Lab, which, along with a team from Northeastern University, will gather and analyze data to measure the effectiveness of the program. But Mr. Struhl says he’s excited because the research could be essential in proving the approach works.

“We know in general things like these ... can work, but we don’t have a great sort of mapping of what specific types of programs ... are most impactful, and which ones are the most cost effective,” Struhl says. “If we can do that better, by looking at programs like College Bound Dorchester, we might actually be able to really establish a better way forward with some of these criminal justice debates.”

If Diaz’s trajectory is anything to go by, the Boston Uncornered model is promising. He’s on track to begin studying automotive technology at the Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology in the fall. He wants to start an auto mechanic’s franchise. He hopes his example will speak to others.

“I’ve been shot twice, I’ve been stabbed once, it’s a tough thing,” Diaz says. “I’ve seen people ... glorify it, but as you get older, it’s like, that was the dumbest thing I ever thought about in my life, so that’s why if I can help one person ... in some way, that makes me feel good.”

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