

# Preventing Violence in the Next Decade

## Five Lessons for the Movement

*UNITY Co-Chair Deborah Prothrow-Stith of the Harvard School of Public Health spoke at a meeting hosted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE) in March 2011. The following narrative is excerpted from her remarks.*

**T**his is an opportunity for us to think about what can occur in the next decade of work in violence prevention. I'm going to share five lessons that I've learned over the years that may help you and this movement.

### Lesson One: Invest Now Instead of Paying Later

Public health and prevention make the case to pay now rather than later. That message has to be said over and over and over again. In these tough economic times, costs are often cited as the reason we are unable to do something. Fortunately, we're getting more and more scientific documentation of the monies that are saved by investing in prevention.

When I was an adolescent clinic doctor at the Harvard Street Health Center in Boston a while ago, a young man came in with his mother. He was about 14 or so and she wanted him in an after-school program. She explained, "I work until six o'clock, he gets out at 3, home about 3:30, and I really need him in some kind of program or activity." He was a healthy young man; there was nothing that needed attention, except his mother wanted him in an after-school program. So we made a few phone calls and had no luck finding a subsidized slot in an after-school program. And we said, "Well, you know this is not something we can do right now, but if we come across something in the future, we'll give you a call. We'll keep looking."



**Deborah Prothrow-Stith** is a nationally-acclaimed public health leader, physician and educator. She broke new ground with her efforts to have youth violence defined as a public health problem, not just a criminal justice issue. As a chief spokesperson for a national movement to prevent violence, Dr. Prothrow-Stith developed the Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents, co-authored "Murder is No Accident" and wrote "Deadly Consequences," the first book to present the public health perspective on violence to a mass audience. She has extensive clinical experience and has previously served as the Massachusetts public health commissioner. In addition to ten honorary doctorates, Prothrow-Stith has received the 1993 World Health Day Award, the 1989 Secretary of Health and Human Service Award, and a presidential appointment to the National Commission on Crime Control and Prevention. In 2003, she was inducted to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Science, one of academic medicine's highest achievements. Prothrow-Stith is a graduate of Spelman College and Harvard Medical School.

As they were leaving, I realized that if someone were to shoot him on the steps of that health center, I would be able to get an ambulance to take him to Boston City Hospital and spend \$100,000 dollars in an effort to save his life. This is the same young man that I couldn't get into a \$4,000 after-school program. We're gonna pay now, or we're gonna pay later. Let's make the case to pay now.

## Lesson Two: All Violence Is Connected

Gang violence is connected to bullying is connected to school violence is connected to intimate partner violence is connected to child abuse is connected to elder abuse—it's all connected. We operate in these silos that we've got to break down. Across the country, people working on child abuse are right across the hall from people working on violence against women, and they don't work together.

When the mother whose son was murdered says, "I would do anything to trade places with my son. I wish they had killed me instead," we must understand that she is saying, "There is no violence that someone can do to me than what they have already done by harming my son." We miss this if we define violence against women as that very narrow space of intimate partner violence, or men controlling or physically abusing women. We must understand that all these things are related.

As we go into communities to bring everybody to the table, don't let people say, "I work on child abuse, but this is about gang violence." Don't let people say, "I work on violence against women, and this is about child abuse." This thing, all this violence, is connected.

## Lesson Three: Offer Healthy Alternatives to Violence

When I was teaching a violence prevention curriculum, we did an exercise in which participants list all the things that make them angry. A young man said that his friend had been stabbed over the weekend and that it took the ambulance 20 minutes to get there. The friend died, even though he lived only a half-mile from where the ambulances are dispatched. That neighborhood, Roxbury, had the longest 911 response times of any neighborhood in the metropolitan area. This young man and his friend had come up against social injustice that had to do with race and poverty.

The class listed all the things he could do with that anger and the impact it would have on subsequent ambulance response times—he could beat up the ambulance driver, he could take it out on somebody else, a little brother or a little sister. They listed doing nothing, which is probably the most common response. It is also a dangerous response because then this anger just builds up inside, eating away, and probably lowers one's threshold for violence in other situations.

*"Across the country, people working on child abuse are right across the hall from people working on violence against women. But they don't work together, even though the co-morbidity of the two problems is at least 30 percent. Effective prevention activities must reflect the connections between the different types of violence and respond holistically."*

— DR. DEBORAH PROTHROW-STITH  
UNITY CO-CHAIR

We have to offer young people an alternative to violence, a healthy response to the anger they feel about the social injustices they witness. Understanding the issues of race and class at work here can take away the self-blame. Writing the mayor a letter can be cathartic. But these responses did not capture the depth of anger this young man felt, and the class suggested that he get so angry, so absolutely filled with rage, that he decide to finish high school, become an ambulance driver, and plan on taking over the dispatching of ambulances.

If we want this young man to have that vision, we've got to have a high school that's going to teach him something, so he can graduate and pass the test to become an emergency medical technician. We've got to have a just system that's going to promote him, so that he can move up and get that position. Saying that we want this is an important start, but we have to do more than just say it; we've got to model it. We have to try our best to respond to our own anger in a healthy way. We have to say this, model this response, and make it popular.

## Lesson Four: Share Power

We don't know everything, so we need to listen to those who know their community, their situation and the solutions. We've got to share power in this dynamic. Those of us on the professional side of violence prevention often have data at our disposal and have access to people; we've got to share that power.

Some years ago I was asked to meet with a man who had a program called Boxing Out the Violence. I didn't want to meet with him because I decided boxing was the problem and not the solution. He happened to know a friend of my mother, and through that person, he was able to set up a meeting. So I brought some staff to my office and said, "We're gonna meet in the conference room. I'm going to be in there for about five minutes. After I leave, you all do the best you can to get out of there because this is a waste of time." In walks this 75-year-old retired, physically fit, very charismatic boxer who tells us about his work attracting youth to the boxing rings and getting them involved in violence prevention. Forty-five minutes later we were still engaged in this conversation. My staff ended up joining his board and helping him raise money.

I didn't want to meet with him. If I were a funder, I definitely wouldn't have even read his proposal. I wouldn't have partnered with him if I were trying to bring a team together. I had all that elitism in the way of what was clearly an important community-based intervention that was having an impact on the lives of the kids that I care about.

We have to listen. These are people who can help us. I've met many survivors of violence, particularly parents and siblings of people who were

*"Children who are neglected or who witness violence are at risk of being perpetrators and victims of violence. And yet we expect the little boy who saw his mother beaten that weekend to sit in first grade on Monday morning and act like all the other children, and we start punishing him for school violence, as if his behavior is not related to what he saw at home. All violence is connected."*

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UNITY CO-CHAIR

murdered. Their powerful discussions of forgiveness and of prevention inspire this movement. When you get tired, listen to them because they are the true leaders. You and I have to share the power, share the knowledge, share the platform, and support that leadership.

## Lesson Five: Cultivate Empathy

For all the good that we do in the classroom [with universal school-based violence prevention programs], it's just not enough to teach how to resolve conflict. We need a lot more empathy in this movement. We have underestimated the fear, the guilt and the pain of the children we're serving. I don't mean sympathy; I mean that connected emotion that allows us to understand what children are experiencing.

Betsy McAlister Groves's Child Witness to Violence project at the Boston Medical Center tells us that 10 percent of children have witnessed a significant episode of violence by the age of six. That means in first grade you have two or three children who are sitting there with mothers on crack, whose sibling has been killed, who have witnessed a violent episode. And we can't judge that; we have to be empathetic.

I'm fundamentally very queasy and so uninterested in gore. But imagine the smells I smelled [as a physician], the things I've done, the places I've put my hand, what I've seen. I don't like that stuff, but I did it and was good at it because I was trained to do it. I was rewarded if I did it and paid to do it. If I didn't do it, especially as a student, I was embarrassed. The queasy part of me got put on the shelf, and I realized that's how a lot of young people become members of gangs. They put part of themselves to the side, and they get trained and rewarded for doing certain things, and embarrassed and punished if they don't do them.

Our young people are not so different from us. We have to have more empathy and understand some of that pain, anger and guilt.

**W**e know what to do. We are standing on some firm science as to what works. And we are calling upon not just our elected officials but everyone to join this movement and prevent violence.

**Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY)** builds support for effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence before it occurs, so urban youth can thrive in safe environments with ample opportunities and supportive relationships. A Prevention Institute initiative, UNITY is funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and in part by The Kresge Foundation. For more information, visit [www.preventioninstitute.org/unity](http://www.preventioninstitute.org/unity).

*“Prevention must be on par with law enforcement and punishment. As a nation, we already promise to respond to violence with expensive and sometimes harsh solutions. We need a companion promise, the promise of prevention.”*

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