

OPERATION NITE LITE—HOW AND WHY IT STARTED

AUGUST 1997

Note: The following speech was given by **Bill Stewart, Assistant Chief Probation Officer, Dorchester District Court**, to the Boston Graduate School for Modern Psychoanalysis, Brookline, MA, in 1997. It is Bill's personal story of the evolution of 'Operation Nite Lite'.

I want to tell you about Boston. Boston today is the USS Constitution sailing out of the harbor under full sail for the first time in over 176 years. It is being awestruck as the Navy's Blue Angels perform a fly over of the ship connecting decades of American history. It is neighborhoods away from the water being enjoyed and it is children playing in playgrounds. This is what it is like now. Ten years ago, Boston wasn't like this. Boston, then, was front page stories of shootings and homicides, of empty playgrounds and frightened neighborhoods.

I want to tell you a little about myself. I started as a juvenile probation officer at the Dorchester Court in April of 1977. Prior to that I had been a teacher in the Boston Public Schools. I had a position as a history teacher but my role as a teacher changed in 1974 during the first year of court ordered busing. I was retained along with some other young teachers, not for my ability to teach as much as for my ability to physically handle the kids in the classroom. My role was to supervise a class backed up by the Boston Police, the State Police and Federal Marshals. It was a daily exercise in survival of the fittest, and of course, there was not much education going on. If you had a kid in the class who became unmanageable, you couldn't discipline him. He or she had to be immediately removed from the room. It was white on one side and black on the other. Nobody talked and everybody hated. It was also at this time that I was assigned to Boston English High School where I had the chance to teach with my father. Looking back now on his career of 36 years as a teacher-coach, he may, in his own way, have been the greatest man who walked the face of this earth. He has been called the COACH OF COACHES by those who played for him and those that did not. He had the gift, the touch, that allowed him to reach and affect over 10,000 lives. He has been gone for 10 years now but just in the past two months, I've met three people from different walks of life who remembered him and what they learned from him. A man in Worcester who met him in 1949 remembered plainly the advice my father had given him. And one of his old players from the early 60's spoke to me of the life lessons that he was taught by the 'COACH'. And a couple of weeks ago, I ran into one of his old students who had just gotten out of Walpole State Prison. He said, "I wish I had done what your father told me to do. I didn't listen to him." All he asked of his players was that they try and they could succeed. My father is my role model and I like to think that I am my father's son.

In spent my first three years in the court system, 1977-1980, in Juvenile Probation. I made it a habit when I started, of driving around Dorchester at night checking on kids. I considered this as part of the role. I was reassigned back to Juvenile Probation supervision in 1984 after three years in an adult supervision unit. *When I started in 1977, stealing cars was the national past time of juvenile offenders. When I returned drug dealing had replaced stolen autos as the thrill 'du jour'. With the sales came the cash, with the cash came the guns to protect profit and turf, with the turf came the 'gangs' and with the 'gangs' came the violence .* And the neighborhood took on the look of the living dead, all day every day. And those of us in the court had no idea how to contend with it except to retreat into the court and become part of 'Fortress Probation'. Why go out into that? The streets were getting dangerous. Besides, our job contract only called for us to work 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM. At about the same time, 1985, the story of the New England Mafia and how they were organized and their ongoing Federal prosecution appeared almost daily in the local

newspapers. In the articles would be little charts on how each 'family' was organized, who was in charge, what his responsibilities to the family were, who were the 'soldiers' and what each soldier's role in the family was. Then the kids started to come in the office and proclaim, "we're 'down' with the North End Boys" (Mafia). I didn't put too much credibility in it but this was their thought process on the streets and the way the neighborhood kids saw themselves. And out of this the "street gangs" of the 1980's developed.

I don't like gangs. When I was 12 years old, I was a victim of a gang. I was stabbed in 1962 by a kid backed up by four of his friends. I was skating on a pond and he wanted my new hockey stick that I had gotten just the night before. I never saw the knife. I was told that my heart stopped on the operating table and that I was jump started back to life. Many hours and stitches later, I awoke to my father whistling and tickling my foot. I can say now, "I'm lucky. I'm playing with the bank's money." But 'gangs' are really nothing but bullies who take your dignity because there are more of them than there are of you.

As the arrests for drug dealing increased, so did the arrests for armed robberies and assaults with weapons by juveniles. And when one of their own was arrested, the 'gang' would show up in court. They would show up in groups of ten to fifteen, all wearing the same team colors, 'walking the walk and talking the talk'. People would step aside. I didn't like the look and would stand my ground right in the middle of it. I would make it a point of making the 'gangs' walk around me. Or I would go out of my way to walk through their group and make a public announcement that the court was having "a 2 for 1 deal on 10 year sentences if anyone was interested". The feeling was that the court house was pretty safe until the day that myself and my partner, Rich Skinner, patted a couple of kids down who were walking into the court house and found guns on them. The game had definitely changed. Now the 'gangs' were in our house. Now the 'gangs' had guns, lots of them. Now the body count started. They were trying to intimidate. And they were trying to do this with numbers. They thrived on being 'deep'. The 'deeper' they were, the bolder they would get. They made no secret of what they thought of the court, or of authority. They were going to do what they wanted to do. They were going to say what they wanted to say. *They were going to take over and nobody could do anything to stop them. It got so bad in and around the court house and the neighborhood, that a judge in Dorchester called for the National Guard to patrol the streets.*

At this time due to staff shortages, there were only two probation officers assigned to Juvenile Probation. Each of us had 'gang' kids who made no secret that they were 'gang' kids. We would listen to their boast and answer, "So what, we're not impressed." We were feeling our way through dealing with this bravado. This was a totally unfamiliar position to be in, because we weren't use to the look, the walk, the talk, the persona these kids were displaying—the colors, their flashiness, the gold, and the fatalistic outlook. A lot of the attitude was geared towards *the instant gratification that a drug sale, or a robbery or shooting someone could produce*. It was power that they never had felt before. It was addicting and created a need for more. This was something entirely new to deal with which we had not been trained for. The role which we received training in was one of a service broker. We would identify the strengths and weaknesses of an offender and then send them off to school, counseling, a job, training, or substance abuse counseling or whatever resource we could find to try and help solve the offender's problems. But we had no special approach to dealing with violent clients other than to inquire into what 'button' was being pushed that made them violent. We threatened them with jail but that didn't seem to phase them. As they would say, "jail ain't no big thing." The pattern we got into was no more than moving files around the desk. As we did, the body count began to rise.

In 1988, a *Boston Globe* reporter came into the office to do a story on the growing problem of violence in the city. As she sat and watched and listened to a day full of hopelessness, the increasing 'gang' problem was mentioned to her. The day after the story ran on her experience in Dorchester Court, the office received a visit from a Police Superintendent who advised me that I

should not be publicly using the word 'gang'. His belief was that that gave the kids credibility. There was no 'gang' problem. We were having problems with 'groups'. But the numbers of kids who claimed 'gang' membership rose as did the drug related arrests and the *body count*.. When a kid claimed 'gang' membership, what were we supposed to tell him, "no you're not, because bureaucracy says that we don't have gangs." What could we do? We thought that we were doing the best that we could. We were told to continue to do what we were trained to do and 'don't take the job home with us'. We were talking to sides of heads. The offender would report into the office as terms of probation required and sit down at the desk and look up and look down, look out the window, look at the walls, with the obvious attitude of, "you're wasting my time." Probation was nothing more than an inconvenience. A typical visit might go something like this, "Hi, how are you doing? What's up? Everything fine? See you next week. Stay out of trouble." It was like we were supervising the *Brady Bunch*, or the *Cleaver Brothers*, *Beaver* and *Wally*. But I began doing one thing differently. I started making 'gang lists' with the information that the offenders were readily giving us when asked. And they were not shy when asked about who they were 'down' with. So by compiling this information, we had an idea about how big the problem was getting. And when one of them was rearrested, I would write 'gang active' all over the record sheet and then hand it to the judge at arraignment.

The high water mark for homicides in Boston was 1990. One hundred fifty two people were victims of violence that year. And I submit that number would have been higher were it not for the great medical facilities that we have here. Many of the dead and wounded were 'our' offenders. How bad were the streets? There were four murders that year in Dorchester within two blocks of the court house during daytime hours. It was not unusual to hear the echo of gun shots come in through open office windows. This was the year that the police finally admitted that Boston had 'gangs' and organized a plan to deal with the problem. It was also the year that a murder occurred that changed the way the court looked at juvenile offenders.

On Halloween night, 1990, eight kids, a loosely formed 'gang' called the "Pistons" dragged a girl off Talbot Avenue (which is about a half mile from the courthouse) into Franklin Field in Dorchester. She was a crack addict and was 'hooking' on Talbot Avenue to support her habit. She also had an infant daughter. Her name was Kimberly Ray Harbor. The kids first beat her, then raped her, then beat her again with a tree limb. Then they stabbed her. They collectively stabbed her *132 times*. When they were arrested, I saw the homicide pictures. A reporter who I knew was covering the arraignment asked me what my thoughts were and I made the comment that the murderers were animals. He quoted me in his article and put 'those animals' in the story. I got a call the next day from somebody who told me that I was derogatory to the kids, because I had called them animals. My response to the caller was, "You're right. I was derogatory, but not towards the kids. I was derogatory to animals. Animals kill when they have to, to eat. These kids killed for sport." Three of the kids who were arrested for the murder had been on probation and under my supervision at one time within the prior year. All were products of broken homes. One was raised by his grandparents, both parents being deceased due to drug overdoses. And while those facts don't explain the violence, the fact remains that there appeared to be no viable adult other than a probation officer who could intervene in their lives and tell them, order them to stop doing what they were doing. They were not all violent kids by prior record but they were. Peer pressure being what it was, not one of them had the presence of mind to say, "stop". And who was lower than them in their own eyes than a crack addict hooker. Seven of the eight were convicted and were sent away for life. One apparently had acted only as a lookout and he turned 'state's evidence' against the others. Clearly, the neighborhood was spinning out of control. The 'gangs' we had only begun to acknowledge, had rooted on the streets and they controlled them. It was apparent that what we were doing with the offenders we were supervising was not working. They were not buying what we were trying to sell them. Prior to this incident, I had been transferred back to adult probation supervision. Adult supervision in Massachusetts starts at the 17th birthday. Many of the offenders that had been court involved as juveniles were entering the

system as adults (17 years and older) and I knew them and was not afraid of them. So I asked back into adult supervision and got my wish.

The Harbor murder proved to be the catalyst for change in the probation department. A suggestion was made to form a probation group which would deal strictly with offenders between the ages of seventeen to twenty-four. This was the age group that was the most criminally active in the district, the age group where one could find either the shooters or the one's that were the targets. With the approval of the Presiding Justice of the Dorchester Court, Judge James Dolan, and Chief Probation Officer Bernie Fitzgerald, the Youthful Offender Unit or "YO GROUP" was born. The group consisted of myself and two other officers, each supervising a case load of about 150 cases, and was designed to be proactive, including having lots of street presence. The terms of probation were examined and rewritten. Basic probation terms consisted of four requirements which were standard to all courts: offenders had to obey local, State and Federal laws, not be rearrested, notify an officer if an offender wanted to leave the state or changed his residence or his (her) job status, and report in at least once per week. We added eight other requirements: to obey a curfew that was set by each individual officer, not congregate in a group larger than two on any street and we restricted them from hanging around where they were being arrested (their turf). When the police finally acknowledged 'gangs' in September of 1990, they defined a 'gang' as three or more people involved in criminal activity. Thus, our offenders could not hang in a group larger than two in their traditional hang outs after a certain hour which was usually 8 PM, although in some cases 5 PM curfews were added. Offenders were required to complete all court/probation ordered programs and submit to random drug testing. Finally, all financial obligations had to be completed on schedule. But more had to change than just the terms of probation. We had to develop a plan to enforce them because the police were not going to 'arrest us' out of our problems. And (going back to basic probation), enforcement was not our job. We expected the police to supervise our terms. But the two agencies did not talk or share information so it just wasn't going to happen. It had not happened before, no reason for it to change now. The police would make the arrest, come to court for trial, see an offender get probation and never meet with the assigned probation officer to exchange information.

In late spring of 1992, 'Peanuts', a young seventeen year old was shot to death at three in the afternoon two blocks from the court house. I followed the police cars up the street that day and when I got to the scene, a blanket had already been put over the body. One of the officers who had responded to the scene knew me and asked if I could ID the body. He pulled the sheet back and asked me if I could recognize the face. The face was familiar but as it was the first body that I had ever seen under a blanket, I was totally taken back. Here was this young kid, lying flat on the street with his life draining out of him into the gutter. What the hell is going on here? I had told 'Peanut' to be careful, to do the 'right thing' and stay away from the things or people that could get him in trouble or get him hurt. I had told him, "If you put your hand on a stove, you're going to get burned." But he did, and he lost and so did his mother. I went to 'Peanuts' funeral as was my all too familiar habit. As I offered my condolences to his mother, she let me know that she believed I had let them 'kill her baby'. 'No, I did not,' I thought. 'I had told him, warned him. Don't blame me.' But maybe she was right, maybe I (we) could be doing more. In five years (1990-1994), there were over 450 homicides in the city of Boston. I knew 68 kids who were either shot or stabbed to death. I asked myself after the funeral, 'Why are they doing this? What are they trying to prove by shooting and killing each other? Why do they have such a so-so attitude towards death?' I didn't feel disconnected from the kids that I was supervising, but they obviously were not listening to what I was saying. I wasn't real to them. I was no more than a shirt and a tie sitting behind a desk. PERIOD. I was trying to sell them truth, justice and the American way and they weren't buying it.

Most of the kids on probation at this time were known 'gang' members. How were they known? Rich Skinner and I would see them on the streets when we rode around. We had gotten into the habit of driving around the 'gang haunts' and gathering information, literally, off the walls

in the neighborhoods. The kids would put up everybody's street name who was part of the gang. You just had to look where to find it. What they were doing was advertising. They wanted everyone in their world to know exactly who they were. We (YO PO's) knew. And the police knew. Both agencies were keeping track of the intelligence but the problem was the agencies did not talk and exchange information. The funny thing about information is, if you asked a kid what his street name was, he would probably tell you. They were, obviously, not real sophisticated and obviously very proud of the reputations that they were earning. So, as my partner, Rich, and I drove around, we would stop and talk to the kids on the street and ask specifically for "Killer" or "Fuji" or "Eight Ball" and the kids would answer. Personally, I also decided that my approach had to change. I had to be different. It was time to take off the tie and put on a baseball hat and turn it sideways or backwards. I had to learn to walk the walk and talk the talk. I had to learn slang and how to talk with my hands. The kids don't see this as an act of disrespect if you do it right and they don't think you're a cartoon character. You will get accepted (as much as a law enforcement figure can) because you know 'whas up'. What the kids were telling me, very quietly, was they didn't like what they were doing. They didn't like having to be out. They didn't like their future and they really didn't want to die. Once they saw that I wasn't just some stupid 'shirt' sitting behind a desk, that I knew what was going on, the facade came down, and they would open up. They also thought that I was a bit 'crazy' by some of the things that I would say or do. I wanted them to think that 'being crazy' was contagious to keep them off their guard and away from me when I was out on the street. When one of their 'gang' went to jail, I'd go down to the walls where the 'gang' had written their names, and with my back covered by my partner, Rich Skinner, I would take a can of spray paint and put a big X through their name and ask anyone there, who was next. Or we would pull up next to a group on a corner and ask for directions to the State Maximum Security Prison at Walpole. The approach clearly drew a line in the sand. We had to step up to the plate.

During the summer of 1992, for lack of something to do on vacation, I asked the Clerk of the Court to pull all the law books where probation officers were mentioned to find out exactly what powers we had, what we could do, to find out what 'juice' we had. It was known that probation officers could make arrests but the practice was frowned upon as we were not trained for that. I also had every case pulled where a probation officer had something to do with the decision whether by input or participation. And what I learned was that a probation officer had more power than a police officer when dealing with someone on probation. By virtue of being on probation, an offender sacrifices certain rights. Most notably, he loses his freedom from either his person or his residence from being searched without a warrant if a probation officer has '*reasonable suspicion that there exists a violation of his probation*'. If someone on probation violates his (her) terms and a probation officer hears about it, the officer has the power to make an arrest without a warrant, bring the offender before the court, and ask for probation to be revoked and the offender committed to jail. Bottom line is that when one is sentenced to probation, they choose to do their time in the community with limited freedom under the supervision of a probation officer and the PO has certain rights to ensure full compliance with terms of probation. In 1989, a Superior Court Judge had ruled that the police were indiscriminately searching kids in high crime areas and threw out many cases where firearms were recovered. The kids that were being searched were probation kids. The Police couldn't do it, probation could, but didn't, because that wasn't our 'role' or 'job'.

There was very little gray area for our clients who were under Youthful Offender terms. As we began to know them, it became apparent that the use and abuse of substances was a major problem. So, I had to take a crash course on narcotics and alcohol and learn the signs that indicated use. If I suspected a kid was smoking weed, I would check his fingertips for skin discoloration and 'roach' burns. I learned to tell whether a kid had done a 'joint' in the last 24 hours and confront him with it. With cocaine or crack use, there is evidence in the eyes and the nose. And I would ask before I drug tested whether or not the client was going to fail. And the client would usually be honest and admit to use with me. So, I would give them a week to clean

out their system and then test them. If they failed a test, a surrender hearing might be initiated, but more often than not I would recommend that the client check into detox. Drug use is obviously a violation of probation but in and of itself the only person being damaged is the offender. Addiction is a tough ride to get off. But combine substance use with criminal behavior that endangers the public and the offender is going to go to jail. The more we worked with the kids, the more human they and we became. They were not just a file, because the file now had a soul. One thing, heroin use was not found. The kids don't like the 'spike' (needle).

When the police developed a plan to deal with the 'gangs', they formed a group known as the Anti-Gang Unit. This group was responsible for obtaining and detailing gang information and for locating and arresting the most violent gang members. They could go citywide. And as the arrests were made, the officers would come into court for the trials and relationships started to develop between the police and probation officers. But the rule of thumb was still, 'I have my problem, you have yours. I'll solve mine, you solve yours'. The court will still close at 4:30 PM and probation will go home. Some lines of communication were being opened between the two agencies which only made sense as we were dealing with the same kids. But probation officers were seen by police as fuzzy-wuzzy social worker types. We were just 8:30 to 4:30 desk guys and of course, nothing happened in court, because probation was viewed as nothing more than a slap on the wrist.

In the summer of 1992, under the direction of Lieutenant Kevin Foley, bimonthly 'gang' meetings were held. At these meetings, information and intelligence would be passed among the various police departments that were invited guests. Strictly confidential stuff on a 'need to know' basis. By virtue of the fact that the court had a special unit dealing with the same kids that they were meeting on, probation was finally invited to participate. Rich and I also began to hear from the police that the kids on the street were leery of us. The reputation had spread. At one of the meetings, an officer related how a group of kids, known to be on probation, were seen out and in a place that they were not supposed to be after curfew.

I advised the group that if a probation officer had been there, the kids could have been put under arrest for violation of probation. This was a startling bit of information for the group to digest. After the meeting, in conversation with Officer Bob Fratalia and Night Supt. Robert Faherty, I made the simple request, "Why don't you let me ride with you at night?" I can make a probation arrest under Massachusetts General Law 279-Sec 3, if you back me up. We talked it over for a bit and Bob Fratalia agreed to do it with the approval of Supt. Faherty who said, "TRY IT." With that, OPERATION NITE LITE was born.

It was that easy. It only makes sense. Up to that point, we had expected the police to enforce our terms of probation. We had been tough from 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM, then we would go home. By coming back at night, maybe we could send a different message to the 'boys in the hood'. And in hindsight, it was so easy to get going, one now wonders what took it so long to happen.

Besides Bob Fratalia and myself, we were joined by Officer Bobby Merner of the Anti-Gang Unit and my partner, Rich Skinner from the "YO Group". As we sat and discussed how we were going to proceed, it became apparent with the uniqueness of the idea and the newness of the partnership, the best thing to do was literally make it up as we went along. The only rule that we did have was when the officers accompanied us into a house to check curfews, they were there strictly there for our safety. If it was not for probation's participation, a police officer could not enter a house unless, of course, they were invited in or if they had a warrant. We were very careful about being seen as pawns of the police. That was one of the earliest and loudest criticisms of the program. And once inside a house, we would act as we would expect someone to act in our own homes, with dignity and respect. The officers filled us in on safety issues, areas that they had been trained in and we were not. And when they were satisfied that we would not put them in

jeopardy, we planned our ride. Officer Fred Waggett gave the idea a name, "NITE LITE", and we were ready to go. Fred has always been good at giving names to programs besides being a good cop.

Now, you would think that when an idea is presented to try and put a stop to what was going on in the city, it would be warmly received. But it wasn't. Both sides looked at the new partnership with a great deal of disdain and skepticism. The majority of police didn't want to get tied up with us and our fellow probation officers felt that the program was intrusive, it wasn't what we had been trained to do, we (PO's) 'wanna be cops' and finally, "You guy's are going to die. They will hold a Memorial Service for you on Friday, and Monday, fifty people will call for your job. It is not your problem. Go home and don't worry about it." But we got the support of our Chief and the presiding judge and that was all we needed.

Our first night out was November 12, 1992. Our plan for the night was to check curfews on at least ten offenders, the leaders of some of our 'gangs'. We figured that they would pass the word for us about what we were starting. We started out at 8:45 PM and before we had gone 200 yards, a radio call was received about a shooting. So the sirens went on and we took off. When we got to the scene, Rich Skinner was informed that it was his client, Tito, who was the shooting victim. Rich went inside the police tape to try and comfort and assist Tito the best that he could. I walked around the tape. A crowd had already gathered by that time. And who was gathering but six kids who were all on probation and all under curfew and not supposed to be there or even out. I slid behind threw group and purposely walked into one of the kids that I had recognized. He turned around all set to fight and when he figured out who it was that had walked into him, his mouth dropped open in disbelief. He stuttered, "What are you doing here?" When I answered that I was riding in the 5-0 (police cruiser) checking curfews, he responded, 'that's foul shit.' Loosely translated, "that's not fair". To me, that was the endorsement the program needed. So all of a sudden, we have to play by the 'rules' that you haven't been playing by. The first night out, we checked curfews, jumped out of the car on street corners, and just drove around and let kids spread the word about what we were doing. That first night, we saw about thirty kids out in violation of their probation terms. We have never seen that many since. Tito died from his gun shot wound three weeks later.

The operation has taught us some valuable lessons. *We now know that one percent of the teenage population was holding the other ninety-nine percent hostage.* Kids of all ages couldn't go to playgrounds, couldn't play out on the street. Kids couldn't be kids because they were in fear. We have stopped spending all of our time worrying about and feeling the pain of the one percent when it was their choice and their decision to put themselves in the hands of law enforcement. The ninety-nine percent were all the kids who were too afraid to speak up for themselves and these are the kids that we don't know but they are in fact the kids that we should be working for. *We work with the offender but for all the others.*

OPERATION NITE LITE started as an experiment in 1992 and ran as one into 1993 and 1994 with two probation officers and a few more police officers. Fred Waggett, Paul Joyce, Eric Bulman and Tito Whittington joined on and they all contributed positively in the early days of the program. We actually had two other probation officers out the first night but they didn't come back so I don't mention them. Basically, it was just Rich and I working the night shift with our collective butts out there in the breeze with some of our peers waiting for the worst to happen. In late 1994, with the aid of a Federal grant in the amount of \$750,000 for police overtime, the operation became a full time initiative. Now, in Boston alone, there are 50 probation officers and 50 police officers riding the streets seven nights per week. We have been joined by six other courts in night time operations in Boston.

Quite frankly, a saint would have a hard time complying fully with the terms of probation that are imposed. We are reasonable with enough gray area built in where we can give a kid a

break if he deserves it. We talk with everyone in the neighborhood and go anywhere. To succeed in our collective goal, which was a simple one to just do our jobs better, our presence in the community must be constant. Because we have been doing well, we can't say that we won and fold up the tent. You have to be there every day. This work is labor intensive. And we are always on the lookout for new 'players'. We use what we see in homes as grounds for probation violations, like the kid who says that he has no job but can afford those fifty pairs of sneakers in his closet. We want to know and have him prove to us and his parent where he is getting his money. Probation officers backed up by police officers confront the kids on the streets and in their homes and give them an alternative to what they had been doing. Comply with the terms of probation, complete school or drug programs, comply with your curfew, stay away from the rest of your 'boys' or go to jail. *It is the offender's decision. It's all a matter of making smart choices. And it allows a probation officer to do exactly what his job is, to get an offender to deviate from criminal behavior.*

We also found out about 'gangs' and how they are made up. In a 'gang' there are usually three levels of membership. There is the inner circle, the leaders. The next level consists of the street bosses, the organizers. The third level, or circle, on the outside is where you will find your 'wanna bes'. These are the kids who have been sucked out of their homes by peer pressure, a loss of parental control or a need to feel part of something. I call this the 'CHEERS CIRCLE', because sometimes you have to go where everyone knows your name. For the leaders and the street bosses, there is no gray area. And those are the kids that we originally targeted. For the kids on the periphery, who could go either way, we gave them an excuse not to be out with the 'crew'. Tell your 'crew' 'that we will be out looking for only you on your corner and do not be there. And we did and they were not. They used us as an excuse not to be there. We talk with the kids on the edge. We ask them what they see in their future, jail or death or maybe a job, school, freedom and a future. We continually stress that 'gangs' are not family. Your mother or brother or sister is family. We let the kids know about what the 'gang' kids did when they went to jail. We told them how they cried in their cells at night. And how they sell information to get themselves out of trouble.

In some situations, I might go into a kid's home for a curfew check and sit down and talk with his mother with the police and the kid present. If I don't find him home, I go into his room, maybe open a drawer or two, make his bed and then turn the covers down and leave my card with a lifesaver on his pillow. He comes home to the 'Red Roof Inn'. The card tells him to be in my office by 9 AM the next day or be surrendered to the court. Some kids have to be reminded that violation of curfew is in fact a violation that could send them to jail. I ask where they would prefer to do their time, home or jail. It is like playing Felon Final Jeopardy. The only thing missing is the jingle. Again, it is the offenders decision. He gets back what he gives. Cooperate and probation will go to the wall for you. Do not cooperate and you will go to jail. Nothing personal. But it is your decision. And crime pays every Thursday whether the offender is home or in jail. I was not raised the way my clients are. I have never had to worry about missing a meal or worrying if my parents would come into my room drunk or stoned and beat me up. To understand the offender, I believe, you have to see what he sees the first time that he opens his eyes in the morning. Then I can say, "I understand." I can honestly say that "I have respect for you because you get by having to face all these obstacles. You are more real to me now, because I now know what you have to go through everyday."

What the program has taught us is that kids aren't entirely to blame for what went on in the streets. Adults bought into the 'gang' image and left the kids alone. What they gave us back was an out of control homicide rate. Once we got back out on the streets the kids said, "where have you been?" If you tell a kid to do something and do not follow up to see if he is doing it, don't say anything at all. We have found out that we can mentor and enforce, suppress and intervene depending on what we have facing us. Kids do not want to die. They generally do not want to be part of the life that they find themselves in, but they do not know a way to avoid it other than when

confronted under a street light, eye ball to eye ball and asked to make a choice. And do not underestimate the value of putting your arm around a kid, no matter how hard he appears. Human touch makes walls crumble. When the kids come into the office, once the door closes, the facade comes down. They vent their souls and their tears are real and powerful.

Being on the street at night takes different training than we originally had. We are in control in our office, but the street is not our office. There is a whole different set of rules to go by, and not every probation or police officer has the personality or temperament for it. What has worked for me might not work for someone else. I have developed my own style to get by, to help me get the message across, to survive. No, I haven't been killed yet. Not even close. But that is not to say that there have not been some dicey situations encountered, like having a pit bull that was guarding a crack house chase me. The best attribute that a probation officer can have is good judgment: if something looks bad, it probably is. Leave and come back another time. Live to PROBATE another day. Patience is also a good quality to have. These kids did not get to be the way they are yesterday. It took years to make them the angry kids that they are. They were made to be like they are not born. And they are not going to change overnight. Give the kid a little of your time and he will be all right. As I say, "if you do not like to swim at low tide, wait awhile, the tide will come back." Just be patient.

This is some of Operation Nite Lite. Nine out of ten parents Thank God and bless us for coming to their homes at night. To the one parent that objects, I have a pretty standard answer: "There are two reasons we are here. First of all, your child is on probation, if he was not, I would not be here. Second, I do not want you to have to visit him in jail our the cemetery. We really should work together. I want to help you and him."

After six years in operation, it is interesting to see how the program has developed. Nobody had any idea how much positive press it would receive both locally and nationally. It is also a study on the effective use of power. One of the early fears was that the police would use probation to get into places they wouldn't normally be found and then take over. Quite the contrary. The police grew to understand the role of the probation officer and have been an effective addition to the message that is being delivered on the street or in the house which is: commit acts of violence and you are gone!!!. And really, what this type of operation does not need is a probation officer who gets courage because someone gave him a badge and two cops to back him up. That type of probation officer should stay in the office because he is the type who will get hurt. *Be fair, firm and consistent and you will be effective.* Bottom line, in the age group that we target, 12 to 24 years of age, the compliance rate with court imposed curfews went from thirty to seventy percent compliance. And, coincidentally, the homicide rate went down 76 per cent over the last two years. Boston went over thirty months without a juvenile being a victim of street violence.

It has been said that Boston is the first city in the country to put an end to the ravages of 'crack'. Operation Nite Lite has been part of that solution. Now, we know what it means when someone says, "no news is good news" because it is.

Bill Stewart
Assistant Chief Probation Officer
Dorchester District Court
510 Washington St.
Dorchester, MA 02124

617-288-9500 ext 173