

# Hackney: Honoring King's legacy through action



Suzette Hackney, [suzette.hackney@indy.com](mailto:suzette.hackney@indy.com) 8:26 p.m. EST January 17, 2016



(Photo: Michelle Pemberton / The Star)

In his quest for racial equality, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. publicly used the power of words and acts of nonviolent resistance to demonstrate his leadership. But his strategic organizing behind closed doors is what really gave life to the civil rights movement.

See, King understood: sometimes what we don't know or don't witness is just as important as what is revealed to us.

That message was driven home for me Friday as more than 100 Indianapolis residents gathered at the Martin Luther King Community Center for a breakfast honoring the center's namesake. Biscuits and bacon were on the menu, but this wasn't some feel-good ceremony to coincide with King's birthday and holiday.

These people were about business.

Discussions buzzed about how the center and residents living in the Butler-Tarkington neighborhood must continue to search for solutions to crime. This past summer, there were four homicides in Butler-Tarkington within eight weeks, including the fatal shooting of a 10-year-old boy, DeShaun Swanson. All of the homicides remain unsolved.

Since, members of the Butler-Tarkington Neighborhood Association have held an emergency public safety meeting and a peace rally. Those have been their public efforts. But behind closed doors, these same neighbors have created and executed a plan to run out the criminals.

"They all grew up in the neighborhood, own homes here now and their kids go to School 43, and they've been going block by block saying: 'You don't live here, you don't rent here, your kids don't go to school here and you can't sell drugs out of that vacant house anymore,'" Allison Luthe, managing director of the MLKCC told me.

"The black residents have stood up on their block and said: 'You can't be here,'" she said.

As of Friday, the neighborhood had gone 95 days without a homicide. While it's sad that residents have to track time between murders, they are taking ownership of keeping their streets safe -- down to the day.

The notion that African Americans don't care about black-on-black crime is ludicrous. It's a baseless assertion that is born from individuals who want to dismiss the very real problem of unarmed African Americans being killed or wounded by police officers.

Yet whenever there is a "black lives matter" protest, the response from many includes such quips as: "black lives only matter when a white person is doing the killing," or "all lives matter" or "why don't blacks protest black-on-black crime?"

African Americans are talking about crime in their neighborhoods every day. They are calling police on suspect activity. They are mentoring impressionable children. They are holding marches and rallies. Don't tell me that there's no concern about black-on-black crime.

"As black people, we have to get back to the village," said the Rev. Charles Montgomery Sr., founder of the King Community Center. "Back in the day if your momma wasn't home and you were out acting a fool, your neighbors got you straight. And when your momma came home you were in trouble again. The village raised us.

"Well, we're not supporting our kids like we used to," Montgomery, 74, said. "That's why they're killing each other -- because they have no respect. We've got to change that."

In response to the neighborhood violence and the community demanding more engagement from the King Center, the center offers tutoring and homework help for youth, classes that encourage them to think like an entrepreneur and a hip-hop dance class.

A group of fathers started a football league that plays at Tarkington Park. DeShaun was a member. The squads have grown so big that they are recruiting additional coaches and must use space in the King Center to organize their teams. They hope to build a baseball league this spring.

So many of Indy's kids are just thirsty for friendship, activities and opportunity. Oftentimes, gangs are attractive to children for the camaraderie. Without real social, economic and educational investments in Indy's neighborhoods, these young girls and boys won't have a chance.

“Just stopping the violence isn’t enough,” Luthe said. “The city’s disinvestment in the neighborhood doesn’t kill people, but it does create the environment for that to happen. Neighbors are standing up and saying ‘we’re not going to tolerate this, enough is enough.’”

“But they have to meet in the middle,” she said.

So, yes, black lives matter. And black-on-black crime matters. African Americans have the ability to pour their energies into multiple causes, just as King fought for many aspects of social justice. Similarly, folks here in Indy are both loudly protesting and quietly working to quell the violence in our city.

As King said in his last speech, just hours before he was assassinated in 1968: *“Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up.”*

Email IndyStar columnist Suzette Hackney at [suzette.hackney@indystar.com](mailto:suzette.hackney@indystar.com). Follow her on Twitter: [@suzyscribe](https://twitter.com/suzyscribe).

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