

JUST WORDS

The Stories of Working People In Our Community

Episode 10: Walker Gladden

Welcome to Just Words—the stories of working people in our community.

Walker Gladden is a former convict who served three prison sentences for armed robbery and drugs. He turned his life around at age 25, and is now the youth coordinator for the Rose Street Community Center in east Baltimore. He's devoted his life to saving young men and women from lives of crime and hopelessness. But he understands the gulf that separates boys and girls in the hood from the rest of the world. He speaks as the everyman of the inner city streets of Baltimore.

I grew up in an environment, in the community, very dysfunctional, because of crime, violence, homicide, drugs, you name it. Everything is epidemic proportions. Now I done come up in this environment at the age of one years old. And I done grew up, now I'm 12, 15, 21. My mind has developed a reality because what I see is real but it is not normal but what am I afraid of now? I am afraid of the things I never really came into contact with. Citizenship, what is it. What is it? What am I afraid of? Going to school? What you mean? I ran away from that as a youth. So now you telling me—What is getting a bank account? I have no idea and no clue. In fact, I think it is alright to drive without a driver's license. But now you telling me to go get a drivers license at MVA. You're telling me about a birth certificate and a social security card. What? I never needed that before so what you telling me I need that now for? So everything that is normal to society in terms of citizenship I am now developing a relationship with at the age of 25 years old. Now, I gotta take on all these obligations and responsibilities with these things that is already normal to the normal society and I have been living in a dysfunctional society all my life and now I gotta deal with these after being smothered underneath all of that abnormal lifestyles and abnormal realities? I never learned none of those things. I am feeling like, why have I been robbed from all these things? Why didn't nobody told me and shared these portions of life with me? you're talking about job or whatever it may be. I never worked before, so I see other people working and how successful they are. Is it possible I can be successful too? I don't see success too much where I'm from, I see failure I see death. You've got 275 homicides here. How many youth out of that 275, under 21 years old? About 45? And you talking about fear? Most of the young people who get killed, they don't get a chance to say these things to themselves: This is what I want to be when I grow up. Or, what my purpose is. Or, what I want to become. They die before they even get a chance So you talking about fear? We fear what is normal,. Because we have been living an abnormal life for so long. And that is the mindset of our young people, and the storms they are struggling through in terms of developing a relationship with right living. Right living? I've been living wrong all my life. Now you telling me I got to live right? Matter of fact, what is living right? I thought it was selling some dope so my mom could eat some steak instead of pork and beans and hotdogs. These are the things that are missing and these are the components that's absent out of the life of the majority of our young people right here in our city.

Last week Walker Gladden led a 24 hour homicide march. 35 people walked from east Baltimore to Congressmen Elijah Cummings office on Capitol Hill to ask them to declare youth homicides an epidemic in Baltimore.

Music: Asheru, *Modd Swing (instrumental)*

Produced by Jessica Phillips. Hosted by Marc Steiner.

Through a grant by the Open Society Institute-Baltimore. Visit them on the web at www.osi-baltimore.org.