

Despite murder, film signals game change

Written by Al McFarlane and B.P. Ford, the editors
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Two events last week made indelible impressions on our perception of our neighborhood and our people. One was the tragic murder of a young man, who according to published reports, was a gentle fellow, whose presence enriched the lives of all who knew him. The other event was viewing the new Karate Kid movie starring Jaden Smith and Jackie Chan, a coming of age tale produced by Jaden's parents, Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith.

The June 11 murder, the city's 22nd homicide of the year, was brazen and senseless. A shooter hid between two houses on Thomas Avenue in North Minneapolis and fired into a crowd of young men in the alley across the street. The alley, between Plymouth Avenue and Farwell Place, separates Homewood Apartments, the twin buildings facing Thomas Avenue and Sheridan Avenue with a commons courtyard between them and the residences on Farwell.

Neighbors have complained to police about increasing numbers of fights and/or disturbances by visitors to the apartment complex. They said the street in front of the complex increasingly became a site for drug sales from automobiles.

Presumably, the shooting was not a feat of marksmanship, but a spraying of bullets with a deadly consequence. Police reported one person hit in the head by one bullet of the 8-9 rounds fired. The victim was taken to Hennepin County Medical Center where he was pronounced brain dead.

People who live in the immediate area say they are saddened by the loss of life, traumatized by the shattering of the sense of neighborhood safety, and angered by the thought that such mindless violence always produces unintended consequences for our community and our culture.

"What is it? What's going on?" we asked at our neighborhood barber shop, the following Saturday morning.

Saturday customers, who, like us, look forward to weekly barber moderated exploration of local and global issues, weighed in with the classic assessment of how the neighborhood and culture had changed over the past generation.

"When we had beefs, we fought with fists. And if we were gangbanging, we didn't act independently. Even if we were jumped by a rival gang or group, we would have to wait for permission to retaliate. There was a structure, an order that everyone had to respect. Then when retaliation was sanctioned, it was our best fighter and their best fighter. We duked it out," said the customer, now a long time Twin Cities resident, who grew up in Chicago.

"The hierarchy doesn't exist anymore. There is no chain of command. Small groups form themselves into gangs and operate independently," he said.

"But things really changed with the release of Boys N the Hood," the seminal film about ghetto killing and dying that demarked new levels of gun violence among urban youth, said a neighbor, who was born and raised in North Minneapolis. "We never had drive-by shootings before that. That's when it started."

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Of course, no one is saying the film or the genre caused the violence. Rather, this art, like rap music and the like, mirror what is going on in the street. If this is so, can it be that a game changer is at hand?

Sunday afternoon we took our 10 ½-year-old grandson to see the Smith/Chan remake of The Karate Kid.

The messages are universal and accessible, whether you are 'in the Hood' in North Minneapolis, in Edina, in Kingston or Beijing:

Bullies are bullies, justifying their status with racial, cultural, geographic or familial rationales that mask or bury the deeper impulse to be a decent human being.

Bullies are taught by older bullies, even some with seemingly impeccable credentials, others with deep depravity of self-respect, buttressed by canyons of self-loathing and hatred.

Fear forces people and communities to hide.

Courage, however, liberates and heals, albeit with the risk of defeat and pain.

Courage, health, and respect are teachable, and properly taught and learned, will win against and win over the bully.

People and communities that adopt and pursue a culture of courage and health unleash joy and possibility, peace and confidence, passion and productivity, pride and power. They train the will of the community to focus on health and wellbeing, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Willard-Homewood Organization meets Thursday at 6 pm at NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center's social service building, 1315 Penn Avenue North. The meeting is open to the public and residents are encouraged to attend to discuss the uptick in violence and to explore crime reduction and prevention strategies.