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ADRIAN WALKER

Still fighting the violence

No one had ever seen a peace vigil quite like the one that snaked through Haverhill last Saturday.

Instead of the familiar candle light march, a caravan of around 35 cars — decorated with anti-violence slogans — made a statement about two homicides last week that shook the hard scrabble community in the Merrimack Valley. Even as crime seems to have plummeted in Massachusetts, with most residents spending as little time as possible on the streets, two men in their late teens — Carlos M. Rivera and Efrain Maisonet, both 19 — were slain in separate and unrelated incidents.

So streetworkers and community activists took to the streets in the most effective way they could think of to remind their neighbors that violence was still present, and still a scourge. The caravan was greeted with cheers from residents lining the streets as it made its way from the outskirts of town to downtown. A video of the event has been shared hundreds of times on social media.

“The community went crazy,” said Jose Rivera, a streetworker in Lawrence for UTEC, a program for teens and young adults. “People in the community started blowing their horns. It was to show that we’re still here, that violence is not normal and to come out with that quick response for the community.”

The event was largely the brain child of Gregg Croteau, the chief executive of UTEC, a Lowell nonprofit specializing

in nonviolence work. He’s had to spend a lot of time the past months pondering two competing realities: One, that the work his organization does remains vital. Two, that doing it in the ways it has made successful aren’t really possible right now.

“We just want to make sure that we send a message,” Croteau said. “The biggest challenge is when we become desensitized to it. Even in the midst of this virus, we want to make sure people aren’t desensitized.” Even before the homicides, Croteau had been worried about how his organization would manage through the crisis.

He employs young people between the ages of 17 and 25 in a range of jobs designed to help them avoid incarceration or to reenter society after release. Croteau’s workforce is made up of people who’ve been in gangs and been in jail. He says it’s a program of second, third, and fourth chances — an approach he summarizes as “mad love.”

They work in a range of programs, all designed to offer options to a life in the streets. UTEC works with inmates “be-hind the wall” to support them and their families. Croteau never harbored any illusions that all of the needs UTEC serves would suddenly take a holiday because of the corona virus. People will still go to jail and come out. Violence may wane, but it won’t go away.

But UTEC’s catering business has gone away. Its prison visits aren’t the same. And fundraising was likely to slow down,



A worker at UTEC in June 2018. The centers catering business has gone away amid the coronavirus pandemic. THE BOSTON GLOBE/ GLOBE FREELANCE

too. Altogether it was a huge problem for an \$8 million operation.

Croteau vowed at the start of this crisis not to lay off any of his workers, and so far he has made good on that. His streetworkers still visit homes of troubled young adults, while trying to maintain social distance. People who have been making food or delivering it are instead delivering meals and diapers to families of people who are in jail. Croteau is working on a major fundraising push, with the goal of raising \$250,000 by the end of April and \$500,000 by the end of June.

Amid the countless challenges

the pandemic presents, one of the greatest is that people who were already barely visible, on the margins of society, will be forgotten. Even in this insane time, the homicides of two little-known young men registered as a danger worth addressing. Even now, their neighbors sat up and took notice.

“The same struggles other people have, gang-involved young people have,” Croteau said. “How do we deliver MaddLove when we still have to be distant? The guys we work with, we want to make sure they’re not forgotten.”

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