

Opening Remarks of William W. Ginsberg,
President of The Community Foundation *for* Greater New Haven,
at a Convening on

*Violence in our Community:
In Search of Understanding and Empathy*

Long Wharf Theatre
New Haven, Connecticut
April 9, 2015

Thank you, Catrina Ganey. That was wonderful – a most fitting way to begin our day’s exploration of violence in our community, and a glimpse at what we are all very much looking forward to - this evening’s performance of *brownsville song (b-side for tray)*.

Good afternoon and welcome. I am Will Ginsberg, president of The Community Foundation *for* Greater New Haven. On behalf of The Foundation and Long Wharf Theatre, our partner in bringing you today’s program, I welcome you to this convening on “Violence in our Community,” and I thank you very much for being here.

I look around this room and I am thrilled at what I see. Not just that we are over-subscribed in terms of numbers, but to see a true cross-section of our community come together today to listen, to learn and to share on this difficult topic suggests as powerfully as anything could that we are determined to face the violence in our midst. And I want to say a special thanks to Mayor Harp for being with us today.

Violence – gun violence in the streets of our neighborhoods - is a singular challenge in our community. Violent acts destroy lives and families, and violence also tears at the very fabric of the bonds that tie us together. The violent loss of young lives is our community’s heartbreak.

We must come together on this issue because we can only offer a better and more hopeful path for our young people if each of us sees this challenge as our own. Changing the course of violent behavior is everyone’s challenge. In other words, violence is a community issue - for New Haven and for Greater New Haven.

This is not to say that we can control all the variables. We cannot. Persistent structural racism creates much of the context for violence in our streets. This nation’s policies on guns run counter to our efforts to reduce deadly violence here in our community. But working together as a community, there is much we can do.

Indeed, let us remember that, as a community, we have already done much. The rate of violent crime in New Haven today is less than half of what it was 25 years ago, and the number of homicides has dropped dramatically since it last spiked in 2011. Our elected leaders have long treated this as a central community priority, and for a generation New Haven has been at the forefront of community policing in this country. Indeed, we should pause to say out loud at this very moment when the troubled relationship between law enforcement and communities of color

occupies center stage in our national consciousness, that New Haveners have every right to feel proud and grateful that community policing is central to what we do here.

Let us also remember that New Haven is blessed to have an array of extraordinary nonprofit organizations working to prevent violence and to deal with the impact of violence on young people and on families in our community. This too is a point of pride. The Community Foundation supports many of these organizations, including as the largest private funder of the Street Outreach Workers Program. We will hear from several of those organizations today.

For all these reasons, we all can and should take some measure of pride in the progress that this community has made in addressing violence. Pride, yes, but not solace. For all we have done, violence remains this community's heartbreak. So we must do more, and do more together as a community.

When violence is faceless and anonymous, we can turn away. When violence is incomprehensible, we can permit ourselves to see it as someone else's tragedy, as an issue in some other neighborhood or town. So today, we gather as one community to learn something of how and why violent and terrible acts happen here among us, to consider the awful human price that is paid, and to feel what violence means to our fellow citizens. In these ways, today is about moving toward greater understanding of the violence in our midst and greater empathy for those affected by it. Our hope is that understanding and empathy will lay the groundwork for strengthening our community's resolve to confront these challenges and strengthening our belief that we can do so successfully.

In the video you are about to see, an extraordinary young man named Henry Green tells us that "The number one key to fixing New Haven and fixing violence – especially gun violence – is going to be believing that we can....We have to believe it's possible and that every last life is worth it."

A word about how we came to this occasion is in order.

The Community Foundation is Long Wharf Theatre's fiftieth anniversary season community partner in 2014-15. This is a privilege for us, not only because of all that Long Wharf has contributed to life in New Haven over this half-century, but also because of our core belief that the artistry in this place illuminates community in uniquely powerful ways. Our partnership this season has been built around two plays that show this. Last fall, Long Wharf produced *Our Town*, the classic story of community in America, a tale of how our lives are shaped by our connections to our hometowns and to our families and neighbors. In an utterly different way, *brownsville song* also challenges us to consider our connections to one another and what it really means to be part of a community.

Our work with Long Wharf Theatre this year on these plays and these issues has been nothing short of a joy. To Gordon Edelstein, Josh Borenstein, Eileen Wiseman, Eric Ting and the entire crew at Long Wharf I want to express not only our appreciation and gratitude but also our admiration. Your work does so much to enhance life in our community and to reinforce what it is that connects us all to one another.

Allow me to mention The Foundation side of our partnership as well. So many of our staff have contributed to this partnership, but I would mention above all Angela Powers, Christina Ciociola, Kat Spadacenta and Linda Estacion. Many thanks to you all, and to so many others.

Today's program is very much an outgrowth of our partnership with Long Wharf.

We are honored that Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, professor of public health practice at Harvard University, is here to keynote our day. Dr. Prothrow-Stith's work over many years has re-shaped how this country sees urban youth violence. Her writings and her practice as a physician in inner city Boston teach us that violence needs to be addressed broadly as an issue of the community's overall health, and not just narrowly as an issue of a singular criminal act by an individual. Her extremely impressive credentials are summarized in your program, so I won't repeat them from the podium. I will simply welcome Dr. Prothrow-Stith, say a heartfelt thank you for being here with us today, and say also how much we look forward to your remarks in a few minutes.

Thank you again, Mayor Harp, for being with us today and for assuming a central place in our program. Throughout her long career in public service, and even more so in her sixteen months as Mayor, Toni Harp has placed the young people of our community – particularly young people living at the margins – at the center of her work. This was so evident in our conversation about violence last week in her office, to which she brought a lifetime of perspective not only as an elected official but as a community leader, a mother and as a keen observer of adolescent behavior. And many thanks too to Professor Khalilah Brown-Dean of Quinnipiac University, who will interview Mayor Harp. Khalilah has just joined the Board of The Community Foundation in 2015 and to say that she has 'hit the ground running' is an understatement. I am so grateful for all that she is contributing already, not only today but to the work of The Foundation in so many other ways as well.

The entire Board of The Community Foundation has stood behind this work – our partnership with Long Wharf, this convening in particular, and more generally our continuing commitment to address the issue of urban youth violence. I am most appreciative. In addition to Khalilah, Board members Alicia Caraballo and Howard K. Hill have contributed much to today's program. Indeed, the entire Board under the leadership of our Chair Will Colwell, our Vice Chair Kica Matos and our recent past Chairs David Newton and Rolan Young Smith has embraced the idea that to fulfill the trust that this community has placed in our hands, The Foundation must address itself to this community's most difficult challenges. We are committed to continuing to do so.

In a moment, you will see the first of four videos that are part of our program today. These videos are the work of an enormously talented filmmaker and videographer, Jonathan Robinson of Build Pictures, and they are very powerful. They speak to the tragedy of violence in our community in the most direct, personal way – by telling the story of local individuals, families and teachers whose lives have been upended – indeed shattered – by violence. If you react to their stories as I have, you too will feel that these fellow New Haveners are us. As we listen to them today, their stories will become our stories too. We are deeply appreciative that Henry Green, Erik Clemons, the Craggett family and Joan Malerba-Foran – all of whom I believe are here in the audience today - have been willing to share these stories and the pain that accompanies them with their broader community. Like all true teaching, their doing so is an act of great generosity.

These video stories provide an intimate look at how violence feels to those impacted most directly. If the emotional power of these testimonies create a need for any of us to step out of the room at any point this afternoon, a room has been set aside as a quiet space for reflection.

Our afternoon program will conclude with a great panel. Derrick Gordon, Alice Forrester, Shafiq Abdussabur, Barbara Tinney and Bill Carbone have each in their own way devoted their lives to

working on the front lines with offenders, victims, families and systems that are tied up in the issue of violence in our community. We will have much to learn from them as well.

So we now embark on what should be an illuminating, challenging, emotional, at times difficult and ultimately important day of learning and reflection about violence in our community. You will hear many different perspectives and experiences, each of which will lead us in one way or another to tonight's performance of *brownsville song*, Kimber Lee's beautiful artistic exploration of these same issues. The day is long, and packed. By design, there are no scheduled breaks, so please feel free to move about, to stretch your legs or grab something to eat or drink. There will be time at the end of each segment of the agenda for questions and reactions, and dinner as well will provide opportunities for informal discussion in smaller groups about what we have heard and how we have reacted.

Again, we thank you so much for being here and for joining in this journey toward greater understanding and empathy in our community.