

Social media campaign launches in Evanston to limit violence

Local residents and community organizers launched last week a social media campaign designed to give Evanston residents a platform to voice their thoughts on violence in the city.

Leadership Evanston, a program created by the Evanston Community Foundation to inspire new community leaders, organized the “dear evanston” campaign, which has Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts, as well as a website. These online sources are aimed at allowing people to share experiences they have had with violence in the city and offer solutions through mediums such as writing, music and photography, “dear evanston” team member Nina Kavin said.

“Because violence in Evanston is such a multi-faceted issue, it was really a challenge to decide which angle to approach it from,” Kavin said. “We decided to do something that would engage the entire community and start a discussion of violence through social media.”

Evanston Police Chief Richard Eddington, who said he was unaware of the new campaign, said violence is usually a chain reaction, and that often in the city victims of violence have been connected to illegal activity.

“It’s critically important that the community as a whole comes to recognition of the context of the violence,” Eddington said.

The organizers are not experts in violence prevention, but they’re all committed to Evanston and wanted to help solve its problems, Kavin said. She added they wanted to make the issue of safety personal for everybody in the city in the hopes that it will start a community dialogue and spark an initiative to limit violence in the city.

Jennifer Moran, Leadership Evanston’s director, said “dear evanston’s” organizers were brought together because they all had expressed an interest in addressing safety and violence issues in the city following recent shootings in Evanston.

Moran said she expected the campaign’s unique use of social media to foster valuable conversation in the community.

“It’s kind of uncharted territory,” she said of the strategy to unite art, social media and community discourse. “It’s a place to get creative and explore a space to communicate together.”

Nicholas Gehl, the chair for the department of fine arts at Evanston Township High School, said it made sense to the group to address the issue of violence in the city through artwork, and the multi-platform layout of the campaign would allow many people to get involved.

“All of our ideas centered around raising awareness, starting dialogue and trying to think of how we can engage people in that work through an art form,” Gehl said. “We wanted to focus on lifting the voices of those that are immediately impacted by some of the safety and violence within Evanston.”

Gehl said people could post directly to the group’s Facebook page or use the hashtag #dearevanston to share their work.

Mike O’Mara, the founder and director of etc. Music School in Evanston, was one of the first people to post to the group’s Facebook page. He shared a video of the etc. choir performing an original song, “What If,” which O’Mara said he wrote after 14-year-old Dajae Coleman was [shot](#) to death near O’Mara’s west Evanston home in 2012.

“To think of young people in my community dying like that made me take a step back and think about how I, as a resident of Evanston, can help,” he said.

Several posts on the various social media platforms will be assembled into a video that will premiere during the Piven Theatre Workshop’s production of “Dead Man Walking,” a play about capital punishment based off the book by the same title, at the Evanston Arts Center from April 16 to May 15.

“Sometimes if you don’t have an end or a way to bookend the experience it can also just kind of float away,” Gehl said

Moran said she has high hopes the Leadership Evanston team will be able to guide the project and start a discussion on violence, but she added she was unsure of how community members and leaders would react.

“It’s worth stirring up conflict and getting people to really confront some of the real devastating realities that we all are living with,” Moran said.

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