

# Activists rented an empty storefront to address youth violence in West Harlem. Then it closed down.



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In 2015, Spectator reported that Harlem activists were struggling to communicate with tenant organizations, which Columbia charges with administering funds. Five years later, residents continue to emphasize the need to mitigate youth violence. COURTESY OF / DERRICK HAYNES

**BY STEPHANIE LAI | FEBRUARY 4, 2020, 2:12 AM**

The storefront in front of Old Broadway between 128th and 129th streets was supposed to be the answer for supporting a community [suffering from gun violence, youth incarceration](#), and little afterschool programming. In 2013, longtime anti-violence activists Derrick Haynes and Taylonn Murphy received a grant for a project perfectly suited to be funded under Columbia's financial commitment to the West Harlem community.

Nearly a decade later, little progress has been made as the storefront remains vacant, and Haynes remains operating in the restricted Community Board 9 office.

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In particular, a lack of communication and priority among the local organizations responsible for allocating funds to such efforts—namely the Grant and Manhattanville Houses Tenant Associations and the West Harlem Development Corporation—have led to difficulties initiating their program, the activists emphasize.

The majority of afterschool programs like these in the city are no longer active due to a consistent lack of funding—a point noted by community members who expressed a [renewed interest](#) in youth services after three [youth suspects](#) were pursued for questioning by police following the attempted robbery and homicide of first-year Barnard student Tessa Majors at Morningside Park last December.

While some are convinced that existing organizations could fulfill the proper outreach, Haynes and Murphy's specific focus on youth incarceration is a response to the need to prevent violence in the community.

The WHDC was created to oversee funds allocated by Columbia to local nonprofits under the Community Benefits Agreement, created in 2009 after the University announced its expansion into Manhattanville. The WHDC has designated \$3 million out of the \$76 million fund to the Grant and Manhattanville housing projects.

The effects of policing and incarceration have long marked the experiences of residents. In 2014, 40 residents of the Grant and Manhattanville housing projects were arrested after what became the [city's largest gang raid in 2014](#). Prior to the raid, Haynes and Murphy advocated for youth services and [mitigated violence](#) after Murphy's daughter [was shot](#) and killed outside of Grant housing in 2011—a high-profile incident that left the community in shock.

Haynes and Murphy floated the idea of creating a [crisis mitigation center](#), even securing an office space in 2015 with CBA funding, to serve as an afterschool program, provide services after outbreaks of violence, and offer a 24-hour crisis hotline.

But due to a series of financial complications, the center was never fully developed. Spectator reported on these obstacles in 2015, and since then, limited progress has been made in creating the center. While the team had originally obtained an office space on Old Broadway, Haynes' anti-violence operation now operates at the cramped

CB9 office which houses the local advisory body representing Morningside Heights and the surrounding areas and is located off of 125th Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

“You can’t deal with these youth programs between 9 to 5. This is a problem that goes on throughout the day and especially in the summertime when kids are out of school,” Haynes said.

Haynes had previously applied for \$40,000 from the WHDC for the crisis mitigation center, but received only \$20,000 because the center did not meet with the regulations outlined in the grant. Due to the center’s reliance on WHDC money, Haynes had to move his operation off Old Broadway because it could no longer afford rent. Despite this loss, Haynes’ team still applied for permits to shut down streets for children to safely play and have helped provide jobs for formerly-incarcerated residents.

WHDC Executive Director Kofi Boateng said the corporation withheld the second installment of \$20,000, but Haynes did not reapply for the money—though he was eligible to do so for the past five years. Haynes said he is reapplying for WHDC aid this year in addition to applying to another district attorney grant for creating a separate trauma center.

Haynes cited communication issues between the tenant association presidents and the WHDC as reasons why the crisis mitigation center has not been fully operational.

“Right now, there is no crisis intervention center on Old Broadway, simply because the people who are able to get it done—WHDC and the tenant association presidents—they’re not seeing the need for it,” Haynes said. “What I see now with the Tessa Majors incident is that at least people are talking about it, getting work done, and now people are coming to the table.”

Without other avenues, community members also lack access or say in how the funds are administered to address the growing issue of youth violence. According to Haynes, existing programs through community centers and tenant organizations are now privatized, meaning that certain residents are blocked from using their services.

Grant Houses Tenant Association President Carlton Davis did not respond to requests to comment.

Manhattanville Houses Tenant Association President David Hanzal did not respond to Haynes’ claims regarding the association’s inactivity, but reiterated concern that has in the past occupied the minds of stakeholders: The funding will end by 2024, threatening the sustainability of these nonprofits.

“There certainly needs to be continual funding for these programs,” Hanzal said. “Nonprofits are constantly trying to get money and the problem is if you're focused on getting the money, you're not focused on the program.”

In October 2019, Haynes and Murphy’s foundation received part of a [\\$3 million](#) investment from the district attorney’s office earmarked specifically for creating a community healing and reentry program in the wake of the 2014 gang raid. According to Bureau of Justice statistics, nearly 75 percent of inmates released from state prison are rearrested within five years of release, and over half are incarcerated again. While some have returned home since then, many are still incarcerated, Haynes said.

[Related: [Ten years ago, Columbia pledged \\$76 million to local nonprofits. What happens when it runs out?](#)]

Former CB9 Chair John Padmore expressed that the issue of youth violence did not arise overnight, but rather stemmed from city officials' failure to address the generational impacts of incarceration.

“There is a much bigger need to recognize the impact of one incarceration in the community. There’s many [criminal justice] organizations coming to support and do patchwork assistance, but there’s always going to be someone that falls through the cracks. We need more,” Padmore said.

“There needs to be an institutionalized reinvestment system in West Harlem to address many of the impacts [of incarceration] over generations.”

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