

Lowell teen center stage at Statehouse anti-gang event

Justice Wright: 'If I wasn't in Lowell, I honestly feel like I'd be in jail or dead'

By Elise Takahama

Boston University Statehouse Program

BOSTON — His family was involved in gang violence. His classmates would bring weapons and drugs to school. His school wasn't supportive. So, when Justice Wright was 12 years old, he moved to Lowell from California, seeking a fresh start.

"I felt like my prayers really got answered when I moved to Lowell," Wright said Monday. "If I wasn't in Lowell, I honestly feel like I'd be in jail or dead."

Wright, now a 16-year-old junior at Lowell High School, spoke on behalf of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell Monday afternoon, thanking state and city officials — including Gov. Charlie Baker and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito — for awarding nearly \$8 million million in grant funds to local programs that combat gang violence.

"The opportunity to support community-based initiatives and ... the opportunity to learn from those initiatives is a big part of what we believe our role and, frankly, our assignment up here on Beacon Hill is all about," Baker said.

The grants come from the state's Charles E. Shannon Community Safety Initiative, which has addressed gang and youth violence issues since 2006. In 2019, the initiative will provide funding to several Massachusetts communities, including Lowell and Fitchburg and the cities of Attleboro, Boston, Brockton, Cambridge, Chelsea, Chicopee, Everett, Fall River, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lynn, Malden, Methuen, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Quincy, Revere, Somerville, Springfield, Taunton, Winthrop and Worcester These programs continue to make a significant

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Justice Wright of Lowell embraces Eric Johnson, youth violence prevention coordinator at the Lowell Community Health Center TeenBlock, during Monday's Shannon Grant event at the Statehouse.

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TEEN/ From Page 1 difference in children's lives, said Wright, who grew up in Oakland, Calif., with five sisters and four brothers. He now lives with his mother and a few of his siblings.

"Without (the Boys and Girls Club), I would not have been able to do the stuff I love right now," Wright said after the ceremony. "I honestly don't know where I would be. I would probably be trying to look for the gang life, because I would want something close to home and that's all I really knew."

Wright said his big wake-up call came after his father's friend was shot and killed while riding his bike through gang territory in Compton, Calif.

"He was in the wrong neighborhood, and he was wearing blue," he said. "People kill each other over colors over there ... And that's when I knew. I said to myself, 'This isn't what I want. I want something more.'" So Wright moved across the country. Now, he's doing well in school. He's active at the local Boys & Girls Club and at the Lowell Community Health Center. And he started his own rhythm and blues band, B6, which he hopes will showcase the talents in the community.

Alisha Harrison, the program director at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell, said the Community Safety Initiative grant is a huge help in bolstering youth outreach programs and resources, including sports teams, a robotics club, photography workshops and a recording studio for Lowell students – like Wright – to explore music production. "The recording studio is very popular," Harrison said after the ceremony. "The

kids think it's cool, but it's also about working on literacy and self-exploration."

The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell, which serves 300 Lowell students spanning ages 8 to 18, also offers programs in career exploration, understanding generational poverty and college mentoring, Harrison said. And it's growing every year.

"Our main goal is to develop pathways for success after high school, whether it's going to college, going into the military or getting a job," she said. "We just want them to have a clear idea of what they're going to do."

Wright said if he decides to go to college, he would aim for UCLA or Duke University, where he'd study music production.

"You can't continue to run from your problems," Wright said. "But there is something you can do. You can rise above it and surround yourselves with people that have the same mindset as you. And that's what I did."



Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito speaks with Justice Wright of Lowell during Monday's Statehouse event announcing the latest round of anti-gang Shannon Grants. Wright, a 16-year-old who moved from Oakland, Calif., to Lowell, said that without the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell, "I honestly don't know where I would be. I would probably be trying to look for the gang life, because I would want something close to home and that's all I really knew."

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