
Interview: Ted Smith

‘These Kids Are On a Death March’

Ted Smith is a Baltimore teacher, resident, and community center director. He was interviewed by Larry Freeman on Dec. 27, 2005.

EIR: As you know, we’re looking at the history of Baltimore and the conditions that have led to an increase in disease and death in certain sections of the city. How do you see this?

Smith: Yes, my part-time job is, I am the director of a community center at Oliver and Collington; this community center is located in one of the areas with the highest death rate and highest unemployment within Baltimore City. I perceive this as a death zone, and it’s almost as if the kids that I service and try to serve, are on a death march. I’ve worked in this job, in this capacity, since August of this year, and this community center is now in its fourth year of operation. Those that have been with this organization since its inception, almost speak hopelessly of reaching the kids.

The kids we service are from sixth to eighth grade, but each year, at least two to three get caught up in some measure of gun violence. And many of the kids that we service, by the time they’re even in eighth grade, end up involved in the sale and distribution of drugs, and some actually even use drugs.

EIR: You are talking about the Clifton-Berea area of East Baltimore. What are the basic conditions for the population?

Smith: Immediately as you come into our community center, on the very street, the entrance where our community center is located, almost all of the houses on the block are boarded up. If you go to certain sections of the area, you’ll see 20 to 30 guys on the corner, involved in illegal activity. It’s open-air drug markets. Many of the young people just don’t speak with any hope, especially many of the males, in terms of their prospects. It’s almost a foregone conclusion, that in order to make money, they will have to go to illegal means. They don’t even speak of the option of trying to find a job.

And also what I noticed, is that many of the kids, more than you would actually think, live with foster parents or grandparents, because of the scourge of the drug problem; many of the parents themselves have been hit directly by the drug epidemic.

Our program is funded by Episcopal Social Ministries—and I appreciate the service—but it’s almost like trying to place a band-aid on a gaping wound.

EIR: Are we mainly talking about African-American males in their teens and twenties? Or is your program for younger kids? And what about other ages? Are any elderly people even living in these areas any more?

Smith: We service predominantly African-American males, sixth through eighth grade. Middle school is our target range; but our program has not been as successful—I was kind of brought in to provide leadership, to begin to figure out ways to make it more successful. My goal is now to even try to reach the males at fifth- and sixth-grade range, because by the time they are in especially eighth grade, I would say, we have [lost] about half of our males: They might run into our center to hide their stashes, or they might hold a drug stash’s money, or be somehow involved in illegal activity, even by that age. But at a younger age, I begin to target them in rites of passage programs, to teach them what it really means to be a young male, and to try to steer them in a positive direction.

It has helped, especially some of those that are in the fifth- and sixth-grade range. But, again, I think that just dealing with trying to reach them, without actually having the means to provide economic solutions, and job solutions, and other type of things—it’s like placing a bandaid on a gaping wound.

EIR: What about their schooling?

Smith: They are still in school. By eighth-grade range, in the area we service, I would say that about one out of every four of the males is not attending school on a regular basis.

What we try to do, is provide mentoring service; we provide academic plus fun activities. And the fun activities are a hook, toward the academic service. Like, we started a basketball team. We have “stepping” for the females. We have a chess club, computer classes, and an array of activities, in addition to academics, to try to reorient them, to steer them in the right direction. And we have the mentoring services.

Many of the kids do not have strong family structures, especially the males; you have very few fathers, or positive older males within their homes. That’s the big lack, and it kind of feeds a cyclical process.

EIR: You’ve also been a teacher in the Baltimore City school system for a number of years. How do you see what’s happened to Baltimore over the last 20 years?

There are the promo stories coming out that Baltimore is a renaissance city. And there’s all this development and progress taking place—the Inner Harbor jobs, the biomedical field, and so on. Then there’s the aging infrastructure.

Smith: What I see happening over just the last 20 or so years,

is, with the shutdown of manufacturing industry, and nothing viable to replace it, drugs are just being sold so hard within certain urban communities, that many people have turned to the sale and distribution of drugs.

Also, I think there’s another dimension, too, with many of the rap videos and rap groups: You almost feel like they are run by organized-crime units! It’s almost like they advertise, both with their dress, and with their lyrics, for a drug culture. And they influence people within that direction.

There was a time, when I was coming out of high school, that rap music was used to uplift. You had groups like Public Enemy, KRS One, and other groups that talked about black unity, positivity, getting your education. Now, these groups talk about how cool it is to be high, to drop out, to gang bang, to steal, to do any type of illegal activity. And I find it ironic, that even as Kanye West spoke out against President Bush in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, that it was 50 Cent, the number-one gangsta rapper, that came to the defense of George Bush. And I feel that it is just typical of the era, that he and others of the like advertise drug sales.

The very first gangsta rap group NWA—which stood for “Niggers With an Attitude”—was funded by Ricky O’Harris, who was in the book by Gary Webb that talked about the CIA drug-cocaine connection. And I believe that gangsta rap is funded, and is organized and connected with organized crime.

EIR: Now, given this drug problem, the lack of economic opportunity for these young men in terms of jobs, the very poor housing and all the rest, do you see any institutions or groups responding to this total collapse? Who is reacting to what you call a “death zone”—that there is no way out, but to die, one way or the other?

Smith: Well, there are definitely institutions that are trying. And I at least salute those institutions that are trying. One, I say, is BUILD, that is, Baltimore Is United In Leadership Development: It’s a group of clergy, that have been involved in fighting for a living wage, and at least putting that issue to the fore, and they’ve also been providing partnerships with the schools.

And, also probably bigger than that, of course, has been the LaRouche movement, and especially the LaRouche Youth Movement. I would say they go even further than BUILD, because BUILD fights for a living wage, and that is important; but the LaRouche movement focusses on manufacturing and how you have to have a significant portion of your economy manufacturing-based, or so. And also, providing just the infrastructure projects, which could put a lot of people to work.

EIR: How do you respond to those who have been saying, for the last 30, 40 years, but in this city, the last 25 or 30 years, that we don’t need the industry, we don’t need the steel plants,

we don't need the manufacturing plants, we don't need the auto plants; and that people will get a higher standard of living, they say, in an information/service economy? Baltimore now has shifted completely to a service economy—that's got to be 90% or more of the jobs. What are the effects you have seen of this transformation from an industrial to a service economy?

And why do people accept the idea, that this is a success?

Smith: I would encourage people to interview, on their own, people who used to work for—let's say—the Sparrows Point steel plant, or other steel plants, where a person could work there and feed a family of four. Then you begin to hear stories, from elders within the family, I know, right within my own family, and I would encourage others to ask where you might have one bread-winner, that could feed a family of four *comfortably*. My father used to brag that he could stay off of work for a year, and yet he could still feed his family with one job!

EIR: Where did he work?

Smith: He worked for the Post Office. But, he also applauded Sparrows Point, where the male bread-winner could hold his face up, as the head of the family. But nowadays, a lot of males can't do that.

Baltimore's a case in point. We've shifted to a service-based economy. And people have said all the things that we would be able to do in an information age; but I think the proof is in the pudding: You have to look at what you see. We've been lied to. I haven't seen the positive effects of the shift to the information age.

I think that one major reason why people get so easily hoodwinked, is because we're not properly educated in economics, and we're just not properly educated, period. I know I definitely was not educated at all, until I came in contact with the LaRouche movement. I went to college, and learned about the "genius of Adam Smith." He was the foremost economist. You learned that the economic system of America is capitalism; you don't learn anything about American System economics. You don't learn about the science of physical economy.

So, I think that most Americans just have not been properly taught economics, so it makes us easy suckers for what the media, and many professors and educated personnel, put out there.

EIR: You are familiar with the idea that Mr. LaRouche has put forward, the concept of massive infrastructure development programs; and combining the best of Franklin Roosevelt from the '30s and '40s, and John Kennedy, and what he was able to do with the space program in the '60s. Baltimore is well-placed, in terms of the entire East Coast, as a key transportation point and shipping point, because of the port and other aspects of its location and the industry that it used to have. This has been completely destroyed

over the last 30 years, but this is something that we would like to revive, around the concept of building the magnetic levitation train up and down the East Coast, from Boston to Washington.

These types of programs could provide jobs. And it seems to me something else they could provide, is some hope. Because one of the problems we're facing in the areas of Baltimore, especially with young black men, is pessimism.

How do you see this approach working, and what specific things do you think we should be thinking about, to end this death zone, and bring it back into a life zone?

Smith: I do applaud the work of those that have been working diligently over the years within the LaRouche movement, and especially what the LaRouche Youth Movement is doing currently. But, I think in addition to the LaRouche Youth working on the national level, there needs to be a core of people working with promising young people, right here, to try to properly educate them, especially in economics.

For example: There was a group, the Algebra Project. The Algebra Project was started by Bob Moses, who was with the Civil Rights movement down in Mississippi. And, this Civil Rights pioneer sought to bring math literacy to urban areas across the country, and the Algebra Project, here in Baltimore, is a part of that effort. The Algebra Project has been fighting almost single-handedly, just for proper funding and equal education for a lot of students within urban areas. A lot of these persons lay down across the cement, right out in front of the State Board of Education, and they have been fighting, and they have the zeal, but they just need just a bit more knowledge.

I think that the LaRouche movement should try to build partnerships, especially with people, young people such as those from the Algebra Project and some others, that really see that things are not right. And they have not given up hope—they just don't know what to do. They need to just be properly educated, and schooled in economics.

I think that LaRouche's approach is definitely what's needed for this area. I was excited when there was some talk about having the maglev trains, because I'd read so much in *EIR* and *21st Century Science & Technology* about the importance of the maglev trains in Baltimore-Washington, D.C., and the amount of jobs that could be opened up, just with the maglev trains. We're definitely in need of massive infrastructure projects. You could drive right around the city of Baltimore, and see the need for that.

I think that what's needed to actually make that happen, is to strategically target especially younger people that have the will to fight, that have not given up hope, that really want to be educated in these ideas, and begin to replace the infrastructure that we have within Baltimore City. Because many of the political leaders within Baltimore City, they lie as much as the neo-conservatives—they just don't lie as well!