

UNIFY PORTLAND



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Unify Portland is made up of a group of volunteer members, including (top, from left) Demarcus Preston, or "Chicken"; Jermon Walker; (front, from left) Nathaniel Williams, Keesha Dumas, Gary Wiggins and Larry Summerfield.

Nathaniel Williams unites former Bloods and Crips in an effort to rebuild Portland's black community

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

The prevalence of gangs in Portland is a symptom of a community torn apart, said Nathaniel Williams — and it's only part of the problem.

"The black community is broken. Its people are broken," he said.

But those who want to end the violence vastly outnumber the gang members, he said. "It's about bringing all those people together."

That's why in August, Williams and his friends created an organization and gave it a name that's synonymous with their mission: Unify Portland.

"First, I want to unify our generation," Williams said.

He and his friends have set out to serve as positive role models and as an example to youths that it's possible for opposing gang members to overcome their differences — after all, most of Unify Portland's members are former Bloods and Crips, now in their

mid-40s, who came together to save their community.

Williams said he wants Portland's younger generations to experience the same sense of unity he witnessed in the black community when he was growing up.

"That nostalgia and that essence is gone," he said, "and I really want to get that back."

As a kid, he remembers looking up to the older men in his neighborhood. The adults seemed to be united, and friends and neighbors looked out for one another's kids.

When Williams started coaching his son's football team at Roosevelt High School years later, he said, that element had vanished.

"I saw a lot of young men that didn't have positive male role models in their life," he said, adding that years of mass incarceration has stripped the black community of its fathers. He has since decided to fill that role where he can.

These days, when he's not working on projects with Unify Portland, he's attending class as a 42-year-old graduate student at

Concordia University. When he's done, what he really wants to do is teach kindergarten, he said.

But Williams said when it comes to talking to kids about gangs, he isn't the best person to do it.

"I believe the best outreach workers are those with lived experience," he said, and he had never joined a gang himself. But his friends had.

"It started with them, trying to create a platform for them to get out and share their lived experience with gangs, and try to be effective in the streets, in the community," Williams said.

One of his friends, and a core member of Unify Portland, is Larry Summerfield. He was one of Portland's founding Crips.

"Nobody in my family was a gang member until I brought gangs into our family," he said.

Summerfield went to prison when he was 18, and while he was locked up, his little

See UNIFY, page 5