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brother, who had looked up to him and eagerly followed in his footsteps, was murdered in a gang shooting.

That's the dynamic he's trying to combat, he said. The kids most at risk are the ones who are looking up to older siblings and cousins who are involved with gangs.

Now, rather than serving as that negative role model, he wants to be a positive influence in their lives.

"It's a crisis going on out here," said Gary Wiggins, another member of Unify Portland. "And I say 'crisis' with an emphasis on it."

Wiggins was a Blood by the time he was 12 years old and later spent a decade in prison as a result of the lifestyle.

Now he's drawing on his experiences to connect with and teach kids who might be on the same path.

"When you come from it, when you can identify, you can reach out and touch them better," he said.

That's what sets Unify Portland apart. It isn't affiliated with the Police Bureau or a branch of government. Its members are all volunteers.

And they have an unorthodox approach: actively engaging with youths wherever they go. That means that if they run into a group of kids or young adults at the supermarket, at the park, or wherever it might be, they reach out. And they keep reaching out until a relationship is established. It might be as simple as complimenting a new pair of shoes or challenging a group of teenagers to a game of basketball or even a race – any way that they find to engage.

"I have kids, I didn't get them the first time, the second time, the third time, but by the time I was seeing them that fourth time, they was coming to me, because I never gave up," said Demarcus Preston, a former Blood better known as "Chicken."

"You can't be fake about this," he said. "It takes all your time; it's something you have to dedicate to. When my phone rings at 2 or 3 in the morning, it's either my kids or somebody that needs my help. I'm going to answer that call."

It was that involvement that Demetrius, 33, credits with keeping him from getting killed or

going to prison.

Demetrius was heavily involved in gangs. In the span of a single year, he lost three friends to gang violence.

As part of a large extended family, he'd also lost five cousins who belonged to different gangs across the city.

By the time Williams walked into his life, Demetrius was in his 30s and packing a gun everywhere he went. Even a short trip to the corner store didn't feel safe without being armed, he said.

He didn't see a way out of the lifestyle.

Williams was his neighbor in the same building, and one day when they ran into each other, Williams reached out.

While Demetrius admits he was initially standoffish toward Williams, he said they started talking and quickly found common ground and became friends.

He said Williams helped him realize that the gang lifestyle was a choice and that there were other options.

"He's always talking positively, so from the first day that I met him, he's always been telling me, 'You need to switch your life up. You've got more potential,'" Demetrius said.

Williams told Demetrius about his friends who were former gang members. He said he knew people who had made mistakes in the past that still haunt their consciences.

"That really hit me," Demetrius said.

It wasn't too long before another deadly gang shooting hit close to home, and Demetrius decided he was done.

Williams sat with him through meetings with his probation officer, advocating for his ability to leave town. After hiring an attorney, he was allowed to move out of state. He said he hasn't touched a gun since he left. He said if he had stayed, he wouldn't have been able to escape the violence.

Now he's focused on school, and for the first time he's thinking about his future.

(Demetrius asked that Street Roots not use his real name or disclose his location.)

Members of Unify Portland said Portland needs a program with enough funding and expediency to relocate gang members when they want to get out. In many cases, it can be a matter of life and death.

But leaving town isn't always necessary. They often explain to younger gang members

Community kickball game to promote gang prevention

Unify Portland's prevention and awareness team, or PAT, works to foster positive thinking and productive activities before kids start glamorizing gangs.

Through PAT, Unify Portland will host its first community kickball game at noon June 5 at Kenton Park in North Portland. The game is open to everyone, organizers said.

Anyone interested in joining Unify Portland's efforts or helping with the kickball game is encouraged to get in touch through its Facebook page, www.facebook.com/unifyportland, or its website, pdxunited.wix.com/unifyportland, said Nathaniel Williams.

Volunteers are needed, and Unify Portland is looking for a donor to help with the cost of hats and shirts.

IF YOU GO

What: Unify Portland's community kickball game.

When: Noon to 5 p.m. Sunday, June 5.

Where: Kenton Park, 8417 N Brandon Ave.

Who: Everyone in the Portland community is invited.

that they don't have to get killed or beat up to get out of the gang lifestyle. Sometimes it's just a matter of maturity and changes in their behavior.


Unify Portland's core has grown to seven members, with allies all over the city and a mission that Williams said is "spreading like wildfire." It runs on a budget equivalent to "whatever we have in our pockets," Williams said.

One of their main focuses is on prevention – reaching out to kids before they get involved with gangs. That includes showing kids that they can aspire to careers outside of athletics and entertainment by introducing them to successful people of color in professional settings.

He said he's not just interested in unifying the black community, but wants to bring all of Portland's communities together.

"It's not us; it's the mission. That name 'Unify Portland.' We want to bring back that essence of community. And it's happening."

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