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Gangster turns his life around

Ex-con draws on his past to help others see the future

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When a group of 16 teenagers descended on the Roxbury Boys and Girls Club to settle a score with a certain youth, club officials called in Andre Norman and his crisis team of ex-gangsters to sort things out.

And when a fellow ex-con decided to stop hustling and surrender to the court on a probation violation, he banged on the door of the church during Norman's 6 a.m. prayer meeting.

"He said he was going back to do his year but when he got out, he was coming here first. If we weren't there for the prayer meeting, if he found the door locked, maybe he wouldn't be so certain," said Norman, wearing the man's enormous gold chain beneath his shirt alongside the simpler wooden cross he prefers.

"You know, if the brother left me with this, he's coming back to get it."

Norman, who spent 14 of his 34 years behind bars, now spends his days reaching out to other ex-cons, children and anyone else he can turn away from "the life" and onto a more productive path.

His mission has taken him to the White House, the State House and Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino's Parkman House to trade notes on how best to keep idle youth from becoming grim statistics. ! He shares space on panels at colleges and jails with police brass, politicians and judges.

Not bad for a kid from Mattapan, who once aspired to be little more than "king of the jail."

"The work 'Dre does is very important," said Mike Kozu, an organizer for Project RIGHT, a Roxbury-based community group. "He reaches out to youths who often do not have someone to turn to. He lends them an ear. We unfortunately have far too few youth workers for what is needed."

Norman was one of the hoods sent to prison during Boston's most violent times in the 1980s and early '90s. He served 14 years for armed robbery, armed home invasion and armed carjacking before his November 1999 release.

Since then, Norman has become a protege of the Rev. Tim Allen, one of the streetwise ministers who joined forces with law enforcement in the '90s to reclaim Boston neighborhoods from gang violence - something 'Dre knows too well.

Last July, Norman invited 100 of the worst gangsters of the '80s who now are out of prison to meet at the church. Sixty showed, despite torrential rain, and a core of 15 now meet regularly to help counsel youngsters away from the path that led them to prison. They are his crisis team.

"I warred with some of them, warred against others and served time with all of them," Norman said. "These guys were the original noisemakers. Guys from Boston, Brockton, Lynn, Worcester. The point was to give them the opportunity to do something constructive."

And a chance goes a long way, Norman says. It worked for him.

Back in 1987, Norman was 19 and awaiting trial. He had just been shipped to the old Charles Street Jail from across the river at the Middlesex County Jail where he was such a fighter he lived under constant lockdown.

So imagine Norman's surprise when a corrections officer named Rick Coleman sought him out and gave him the best job in the old jail - trustee of the showers.

"One day I just asked him: Why me? I was the worst disciplinary problem they had and he knew it

but he still gave me the best job in the jail," Norman said. "He told me sometimes the worst can be the best if you just give them the chance."

Coleman, now a captain and supervisor at the Nashua Street Jail, barely recalled Norman from Charles Street but was bowled over by his recent visit. "This is such a thankless job, it's cool to have someone like that come back and thank you for something you did," Coleman said. "It keeps things in perspective."

But Coleman's lesson didn't sink in for years. Norman's fighting bounced him from state prisons to federal prisons and back again, with his sentence growing.

"I didn't get my head right 'til '91," Norman said. "I was in segregation. I was finishing up a 2 1/2-year segregation sentence for attempted murder and God spoke to me, long story short. It was a moment of clarity, definitely."

Not all inmates find God and the assistance of groups like God's Posse and the Project Right, as Norman did. So 'Dre now is part of the Boston Re-Entry Program that targets inmates most likely to re-offend and offers them help and a warning before they get out of the Suffolk County House of Correction.

"I think he's really trying to do the right thing," said Boston police Superintendent Paul Joyce, who helped start the Re-Entry Program but leaves it's face-to-face work to front-line probation officers and folks like Norman.

"He sends the message we want to send in a more powerful way than a police officer could," Joyce said. "Ultimately we are trying to save lives. Even though our backgrounds are much different, we are working toward the same goal."

-- Part of Norman's approach is to instill a sense of the future in individuals whose lives have been based on day-to-day thrills and survival. He tries to lead by example, talking about his own future investments, including a Roth IRA, saving for a house, continuing his education.

"To some people this would be common sense, but that's not how I grew up. My father didn't think about getting to 59 1/2; I certainly didn't think about it. What would I have known about a Roth IRA?" he asks.

Norman now is spearheading the renovation of a three-story Victorian and carriage house on Columbia Road - a place where he lived briefly as part of God's Posse when he first got out of stir.

"Housing is critical. A lot of people want to change, but if you are living in the same circumstances, it's hard to change," Norman said.

Plans call for five bedrooms plus a transitional room with three crisis beds, a counseling area and a drop-in center. Construction should wrap up later this month.