

*Empathy is an important element in most human service interventions, whether the goal is to change negative behaviors or reinforce positive ones, to comfort or to inspire. For both the management and outreach staff at One Vision One Life, empathy with the street youth involved with gangs, drugs, and guns comes easily because, as Director Richard Garland puts it, “we’ve been where they are, but we got out—and they can, too. That’s why this program works. We can show them that another way of life is possible.”*

*The program’s success stories are many but none quite so compelling as that of staff member Taili Thompson, who who himself is a product of OVOL and El Gray who, through OVOL was presented an opportunity to steer youth away from the path of destruction that once consumed his life.*

*To learn more about One Vision One Life, visit the OVOL website ([www.onevisiononelifelife.org](http://www.onevisiononelifelife.org)), the DHS website ([www.allegheycounty.us/dhs](http://www.allegheycounty.us/dhs)) or call 1-866-291-8829.*



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Richard Garland, Director, One Vision One Life

**O**ne Vision One Life aims to reduce violence through a team of community coordinators who systematically collect street-level intelligence and intervene in disputes, turf battles, and gang/group incidents before they become shootings and homicides. Working with law enforcement and the clergy, OVOL reaches out to youth at risk with jobs and needed services and to communities through public education and “speak-outs” against violence.

What makes One Vision One Life (OVOL) unique among outreach programs is that its staff benefits from the program as much as the youth they are hired to reach. OVOL understands that the best way to reach these troubled youth is to employ people who used to commit the acts they’re trying to help others avoid. There is no better example of this than the director, Richard Garland, whose gang activity as a youth in Philadelphia led him to 23 ½ years in prison.

When Garland was released, he found that all of his friends were dead, and he was determined to do something constructive with his own life. After earning both bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Pittsburgh and serving stints in several local human service agencies, he became the director of YouthWorks and, in 2003, when Allegheny County youth homicides peaked, of One Vision One Life.

As Director of OVOL, Garland inspired others like him to use their experience to make a difference – to turn around their own lives and, in so doing, the lives of the next generation of at-risk youth. In less than five years, OVOL has grown from having community coordinators in three city neighborhoods to having a presence in seven communities throughout the county.

Each community coordinator – who themselves are beneficiaries of OVOL as they are offered an opportunity to give back, get paid and stay away from the negative decisions that got them into trouble – has a caseload that consists of the hardest-to-reach kids (potential shooters, victims or current gang members). They reach out to these kids with one-on-one counseling, structured basketball leagues, ensuring safe passage for youth from school to their homes, and after-school educational programs.

For 11 years, **El Gray** ran a lucrative drug-selling business on the street. Then he became his own best customer, and the downward spiral began. After hitting bottom, he ran into Garland, who by then was the Director of One Vision One Life.

That was then. Now, El, program manager at OVOL, is drug-free and determined to “save the babies” in his community. Appalled by the number of juveniles from Allegheny County who are serving life sentences, he knows first-hand how gangs and violence destroy whole families. (Of four siblings, he’s the only survivor.)

He’s fighting “a turf war, a gang war, a drug war, and a retaliation shooting war” on the streets of Pittsburgh, and he believes “we’re losing our young black men at such an alarming rate that they’re approaching extinction.” With those he can reach, he practices “reality therapy”—taking them to the County Jail to talk with inmates and to the morgue and a cemetery to show them the “rewards” of the life they’re living. Then he injects a “seed of hope,” along with a part-time job and other needed assistance.

Like most of OVOLs “community coordinators” across Pittsburgh and Allegheny County who try to settle neighborhood beefs before they turn into deadly retaliatory shootings, **Taili Thompson** is also one of the program’s success stories. Once an honor student and championship basketball player at Perry High School, he dropped out of college to run drugs in Philadelphia and New York City, reveling in the wealth that won him “street cred” and the attention of his nieces and nephews on whom he lavished expensive gifts.

He wound up in a New Jersey prison for three years on felony drug counts, and while he was there, his younger brother was killed in a gang shootout. It was a wake-up call. Back in Pittsburgh, he met Garland, who had previously mentored his brother. Garland put Taili to work.

“When I saw Richard’s commitment, I had to make a similar one in return,” Taili recalled. He put his basketball skills to use in launching the North Side B-Ball Academy, where more than 250 youths work, play, and compete while they stay in school and keep their grades up. “Lots of what I learned, I learned by playing basketball,” Taili said, “especially the transferable skills like discipline, motivation, and courage.”

Taili is proud of the young men who listen to his advice and go on to college: “I tell them that the things you take in the street, things you think will get you out of poverty, can always be taken from you. But knowledge and education. . . they can’t be taken away from you. . . those are the things that will get you out of poverty.”

Meanwhile, Taili is following his own advice. With 53 credits and a strong B average in paralegal studies, he’ll receive an Associate’s Degree from Community College of Allegheny County next spring and hopes to enroll in a pre-law program at Point Park University in the fall.

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-Taili

OVOL has even added seven female community coordinators who make up the “Sisterhood Initiative.” Having experienced the criminal justice system from the inside, each has a commitment

to make young females more than “an afterthought in the juvenile justice system.” Under **Samantha Swartz**, Director of Girls and Women Program, they reinforce protective strengths and offer skill building workshops, mentoring, and career exploration to encourage the young women to pursue their own goals with confidence.

At OVOL, nobody doubts that these efforts are making a difference even though all the stories don’t have happy endings. Those that wind up on the evening news are fueled by the ready availability of guns and drugs — and the increasing shortage of jobs for young people.

“We can’t do it alone,” Garland admits. To end what he terms the community’s “conspiracy of silence,” he is calling on neighborhoods to become involved, refuse to allow drug dealing on the streets, and discourage gang activity. His plans for OVOL, in addition to the hope for more resources and possibly a building of their own in the future, is to expand into other high risk neighborhoods, increase mediation efforts, and — in short—to stop the trouble before it starts.

For a complete list of funders, please visit the OVOL website at [www.onevisiononelife.org](http://www.onevisiononelife.org).