

Fists Up, Guns Down: Grassroots initiative trying to stop gun violence in Alton

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Over the last few months, the **Alton Police Department** said they are investigating several instances of gunfire in the area near **Ridge Street** and **Central**, and one group of young men from the neighborhood say they are helping stop that violence through something much less dangerous - boxing.

Fists Up, Guns Down, as it is called, is a grassroots DIY initiative concocted by Altonian **Brian Newman**. He described the erroneously-named "Mexico" area of Alton, as it is colloquially known, as home. He said much of the gun violence in his neighborhood is "new," saying people's normal solutions do not include guns. He said much of that violence in Alton is being imported from **North St. Louis County** and **East St. Louis**, but said he was doing his part to quell such problems in Alton, as well as those other communities.

"Alton is a pretty good town," Newman said. "The people causing problems are not the citizens of Alton. They are outsiders coming in and not getting along with each other. They come here because of the different bars and clubs here that aren't like other places."

When people in his neighborhood or friend circle have a problem, Newman said he first encourages them to communicate with each other. If that does not fully solve the issue, Newman said he gives each of them a pair of boxing gloves and encourages them to duke it out through a fair fight with sportsmanship in impromptu matches held in the neighborhood.

While both **Alton Mayor Brant Walker** and **Alton Police Chief Jake Simmons** have reservations regarding the venue and the dangerous nature of the sport, they both said they saw the potential of the grassroots initiative in helping some of the more crime-riddled neighborhoods in Alton.

"I would prefer they talked it out, but if they can get insurance, a place to do it and proper safety equipment, I'm all for them settling their problems with sportsmanship," Walker said. "Boxing is a great sport."

Simmons said the police department would even donate the initiative proper helmets, gloves and mouth guards if they could find a safe place to host it and secure insurance funding.

"I think boxing is a great way to teach athleticism and sportsmanship," Simmons said. "Movements like this have helped communities in Detroit and Los Angeles deal with their issues without gun violence."

Alton mayoral candidate and community activist **Joshua Young** is utilizing Newman's initiative to showcase examples of who he describes as "champions" in the neighborhoods. He spoke of Fists Up, Guns Down at a mayoral candidate panel hosted by the **Alton Community Awareness Panel** last week. He said neighborhood champions such as Newman should be given assistance by the city's administration.

Alton Police Chaplain Jason Harrison also met with the young men from Fists Up, Guns Down and offered the potential use of **Deliverance Temple**, located at 1125 E Sixth St. for the matches. If insurance could not be secured, however, Harrison said the church will open its basketball court at least for neighborhood use.

"We can unify grassroots movements with churches, the community and even the police department," Young said at a meeting of Fists Up, Guns Down. "This is where the unification of Alton can really show."

Newman said most of the fights happen due to "pride." He said, so far, everyone has taken to it very well. He said two guys get in a match against each other and usually end it either as friends, or at least with an understanding of mutual respect. He said his efforts have been extremely successful in helping cool tempers, and has worked to prevent the asymmetrical neighborhood warfare, which often ends in the use of weapons.

"You don't have guys going at each other 15 on three, or even five on one anymore," Newman said. "Fights like that are why people bring knives or guns. Alton is a good town, a peaceful town. No one around here goes straight for their guns when they're upset about something."

Newman said the fights have two people go at it one-on-one for about a minute or two, and then everything is usually settled. He said most of the time, people just need a method to vent their frustrations.

Chicago native, **Curtis McBride**, said he found Alton to "be OK" when he first moved into town for his girlfriend. He said that feeling has since "shifted," but refused to comment regarding how or why. He said he was behind Newman's initiative, saying it was a great way for people in the neighborhood to settle disputes without anyone having to get seriously injured or even killed by guns and knives.

Young, Simmons and Harrison said they would work with Newman and his friends to try to build a community support system for Fists Up, Guns Down. That system would have to include a safe place to host such events, proper equipment and insurance coverage.

Simmons said he hoped a program could be implemented to possibly teach children how to box, giving them physical health and sportsmanship.

Young agreed with Simmons, but took it a step further, saying he hoped the program could be hosted in a possible future community center, which would not only host boxing and other martial arts, but also focus on the overall health and wellness of everyone participating. He echoed that hope at the mayoral panel as well.

Newman seemed a bit leery of hosting the events somewhere such as the YWCA and Boys and Girls Club, or even a community sports complex, saying he would rather keep it in the neighborhood, so people would not have to go to some other location or risk stewing over their anger while a location reservation could be made. He did seem willing to work with Young, Harrison and Simmons to reach an agreement, which would work for all parties and their safety concerns.

Harrison said such a location could provide a safe place for neighborhood children to go while their parents are working.

"There's a big deficit with absent African-American fathers," Harrison said. "If there was a place kids could go with good male role models that would be safe and away from all the problems facing at-risk youth, it would be great."

Alton is one of several communities in which Newman said he has started such a program. He said he is working with similar neighborhoods in St. Louis County and East St. Louis, adding he would love to go to some of the more violent Chicago neighborhoods and try to work out similar initiatives there.