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## The New Orleans Fight Against Gun Violence

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The New Orleans Fight Against Gun Violence

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts,  
in  
English  
Professional Writing

By

Taylor Berry

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Abstract:

Gun violence in New Orleans has grown exponentially over the years. As a society we often forget to reflect on how gun violence effects the youth in our communities. Local members of the community in New Orleans have decided to come together to form organizations that can produce better outcomes for the youth in the New Orleans area, two of those organizations being Son of A Saint and the Youth Empowerment Project. Both of these organizations have started the journey to decreasing the amount of gun violence in the city.

Keywords: New Orleans, Gun, Violence, Youth, Fight to end gun violence in New Orleans

In 2012, eleven-year-old Ka’Nard Allen was shot outside of his porch in a drive-by shooting. His 5-year-old cousin Brianna was outside on the porch as well and was murdered that day. The following year, Ka’Nard was shot during the Mother’s Day Parade shooting in New Orleans, where a man pulled out a gun in a crowd and just started shooting. Twenty people were hit that day. Ka’Nard was shot twice. He has been shot three times on two separate occasions, and he hasn’t even graduated high school. Ka’Nard has a difficult family history. A few years ago, the Allen family had several members placed in prison for involvement with drugs, his two older brothers are in prison, and his stepmother murdered his father. His mother does everything that she can to try to keep him out of trouble. She wants a better life for him.

Many kids in New Orleans share stories similar to Ka’Nard’s. For most, there are few organizations that they can turn to for help. The Allen family was lucky enough to come across Son of A Saint to find mentorship for Ka’Nard. Other families in New Orleans with similar predicaments have found assistance from the Youth Empowerment Program.

Countless numbers of youth are exposed to gun violence a year and yet, society still hangs on to the romantic notion of guns. Our society has turned these weapons into something playful, -- from water guns to video games, and even movies, guns in the world aren’t viewed as much of a problem to youth. However, the bullets that punctured Ka’Nard Allen’s teen-age body three times and killed his 5-year-old cousin were anything but playful. The gun violence epidemic is a many-pronged monster that can sometimes seem impossible to get under control.

Research has shown that when youths are exposed to gun violence it can cause intrusive thoughts about the traumatic event and sleep disturbances, so it isn’t surprising that those youths who are effected have problems focusing in class and performing at a high level. The exposure to

gun violence can cause youth to withdraw from others and become very secluded from society. At a young age it is hard to process what was witnessed and most kids don't feel comfortable discussing it so they just keep it bottled up inside. These emotions disrupt social growth in youth and often create a lot of distress for them.

It is no secret that New Orleans is a city that is affected by gun violence. In New Orleans the gun violence rates have experienced exponential growth. 90% of the murders that take place in New Orleans involve gun violence. On Labor Day in 2016, there was a weekend shooting in New Orleans in Central City that killed a bystander, Earnest McKnight, and injured five others; in October of 2016, a shooting in Mid-City killed three people and injured two; and in November of 2017 a Bourbon Street shooting killed one person and injured nine. There have been a number of multi-victim shootings taking place in this city and they are all taking incident bystanders.

According to the Bureau of Justice Assistance, in March of 2011, 50% of convicted murderers in New Orleans were 23 years or younger. There is a huge problem in this city in relation to protecting its youth from gun violence and the effects from it. The lack of organizations dedicated to changing the lives of youth in New Orleans had impacted the city in past years. A lot of kids felt hopeless and didn't strive for change. They didn't desire to be better than what they were.

In 2016 alone many of the young people in New Orleans have faced a multitude of challenges regarding crime, violence, lack of opportunity, poverty, hopelessness, and many other things. However, that is beginning to change. New Orleans has been taking serious steps to reduce violence in the city. New Orleans is known for having innovative citizens. There is a huge

small business market here where the community supports one another. That same enterprising spirit has been at work when it comes to inspiring a change in the city regarding high levels of gun violence. Some committed citizens of the community have emerged and started organizations in hopes of creating environments where these kids can grow into something other than a societal stereotype. There is evidence that their efforts are working.

Son of a Saint and The Youth Empowerment Project are two organizations in New Orleans that primarily focus on helping youth in the city overcome the violence they have been exposed to. The main goal of both of these organizations is to stop the cycle of violence in the lives of these kids. These organizations try to expose the youth to different experiences and show them that they have opportunities besides following the footsteps of people in their communities who resort to violence. First and foremost, these two organizations serve as somewhat of a safe haven for New Orleans youth. With these groups, the youth of the city are momentarily able to step away from certain aspects of their life. They gain friends and mentors who can help mold them into the people that they can be, and most importantly it gives them someone to talk to and confide in.

These organizations usually get these kids while they are at an impressionable age, hoping to make an impact on them and showing them different roads to take in life rather than the options that are typically in front of them. In doing this, the organizations hope to decrease the amount of violence that takes place in New Orleans, but most importantly help change the lives of young people who can in turn positively impact other young people's lives.

According to researchers, New Orleans youth are some of the most at risk and neglected in the country. In 2011 the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "Kids Count Report" found that 34% of

kids in the New Orleans area are impoverished, which is much higher than the national average of 20%. Tulane University also conducted research on this topic and found that 15% of Orleans Parish teenagers are not attending school or working. According to the Youth Empowerment Project “Youth in New Orleans are two times more likely to live in poverty and drop out of school without a high school diploma than youth elsewhere in Louisiana.”

One of these organizations that wanted to see a change in the city of New Orleans started thirteen years ago and has grown exponentially over the years. The Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) focuses on youth based in New Orleans. It has a strong initiative of impacting youth who were affected by gun violence. YEP was established in 2004 with the office of juvenile justice for the community of integration services. Melissa Sawyer, Rebecca Kendig, and Angela Conyers Johnese started the organization in hopes of building healthy lives and steering youth in the right direction.

Melissa Sawyer serves as the founder of the YEP. Sawyer is a New Orleans transplant who made it here after she completed her degree from Harvard. She moved here in her early 20s because she appreciated the culture of New Orleans but stayed because she fell in love with the opportunity to help others especially those who are in urban areas, she said. Melissa initially was a teacher and realized that really wasn't her calling. After floating around for a few years, she realized that she had to make a difference in the lives of youth in New Orleans. After she saw the amounts of crime and violence that were taking place here, she knew that she couldn't just walk away. “It's all about giving creative young people opportunity,” said Sawyer.

Before Melissa Sawyer, Rebecca Kendig, and Angela Conyers Johnese started the YEP, they worked together at the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana's Post-Disposition Project



(PDP). During a three-year span, the PDP helped reduce the number of juveniles who were incarcerated in Louisiana by the hundreds with better legal representation and post incarceration support. Unfortunately, they realized that there wasn't anything put in place to help prevent youth from falling into an endless cycle of arrests for violent crimes.

In 2003, Act 1225, The Juvenile Justice Reform Act of Louisiana, was passed. It had the support of the Office of Youth Development, which is now the Office of Juvenile Justice, and a commitment from the founders of the Youth Empowerment Project to provide a quality based re-entry program for youth. Ultimately, the Youth Empowerment Project was created from this, and so was the first juvenile re-entry program in the state of Louisiana.

Sawyer started this program with only five people on her staff. In the first year of operation, the program serviced 25 youth and had an annual budget of \$235,000. Today YEP operates 11 programs and has 52 employees and an annual budget of \$3.8 million. 49% of YEP's budget comes from grants. The other 51% is through public funding, individual contributions, and earned income.

The Youth Empowerment Project is the largest, most comprehensive organization in New Orleans that addresses the needs of vulnerable youth and has recently created a satellite service in St. Charles Parish.

In fact, the Youth Empowerment Project has grown so much today that there are three separate locations around the city that service at risk youth. They are able to reach youth in each area of the city, and offer them a variety of classes and mentorship, the goal being that no area or child can go untouched, meaning that they have an opportunity to be exposed to their program.

The mission of the Youth Empowerment Project, as stated on their website, is “to engage underserved young people through community-based education, mentoring and employment readiness programs to help them develop skills and strengthen ties to family and community. Their core purpose is to simply empower young people to improve their lives and the lives of others.”

Amanda Talbert serves as the youth services coordinator for the Work & Learn Program. She has been with the YEP for almost two and a half years now, but has been working with underserved youth since 2005, and still feels inspired to impact the lives of the youth in the YEP program. “I wanted to work for an organization that was dedicated to the youth in the city of New Orleans,” said Talbert. She also touched on the research she had done on organizations in New Orleans making an impact on youth and felt that the Youth Empowerment Project was the right place for her.

Talbert explained how each role at the YEP has different objectives. As the youth services coordinator, Talbert works with youth on a multitude of things that may limit them in terms of finding successful employment opportunities. Aside from that, Talbert steps in and assist with things such as childcare, access to a medical services and financial assistance such as food stamps. “I advocate for students who are having trouble with educational services or legal matters as well,” said Talbert.

Through their eleven programs, YEP provides New Orleans youth between the ages of 7 and 24 with a variety of age-appropriate services that include high school equivalent courses and literacy instruction, assistance with transitioning into post-secondary education and employment opportunities, job readiness training, afterschool enrichment, academic support and tutoring, summer programming, mentoring, intensive case management, assistance with basic needs, and a

holistic set of client-centered ancillary wrap-around services that are unique to each youth and their individual circumstances.

According to the Youth Empowerment Project “The YEP serves 1,000 at-risk youth in New Orleans. 90% of their members live in the central city area of New Orleans, which is one of the most violent, impoverished and under-served areas in the nation.” More than half of the members in the YEP have been exposed to violence or have personally witnessed shootings.

The YEP knows all too well about gun violence in New Orleans and the effects that it has on our youth. The organization has lost some of its own members to gun violence. The Director of Reintegration Services, August Collins, said it is very sad and stressful when they lose young people in the organization. “Here at the Youth Empowerment Program we come together, we brainstorm, we provide support to the family, friends, and relatives. We can’t change the outcome of when we lose a young person, but we just try to be there to help the parents,” said Collins. Collins has witnessed a lot of loss with the kids that have gone through the program. He has attended over 310 funerals.

Collins is well aware of the issues of young people getting ahold of these guns and how it is portrayed in society. He believes that the quick and easy access to guns is the real problem with youth and gun violence. YEP understands that these kids are even able to find guns at their homes.

The focus of YEP is on pulling these kids out of their current situation and teaching them the tools that will help them be successful in the real world. YEP is trying to teach kids how to be responsible and the importance of hard work because those characteristics will help them move up from their current place and get off the streets and away from the high level of gun

violence in the city. YEP has had very positive results from its efforts. In fact, 83% of the kids who are mentored or are a part of the youth advocacy program successfully complete each of the programs that they are placed in.

The YEP project has a Work and Learn center. The center is located off of Oretha Castle Haley in New Orleans. The center is covered in photos of its members with inspiring messages or displaying them working or doing community service. The center is broken up into different rooms to separate the programs that they offer such as, their bike shop, media, and digital jobs. The bike shop teaches the youth mechanical and soft skills as well as providing them with a twelve-week program where they work in the bike shop and repair bikes for people in the community. This work gives them the ability to earn a stipend. These kids are servicing the community with the bike shop by doing minor repairs, big repairs, and assembling bikes. The bike shop plays the role of helping the kids understand what having a real job is like. They even clock in and out each day, and are expected to be on time just as you would be in the adult world.

YEP also has an employment transition program where they try to connect their members with potential employers and build relationships that they have in the community to allow their young members to get a good fit and have an opportunity to grow and possibly gain employment, while focusing on skills that they need to improve on. In doing this they are able to see what each member is still struggling with, while still being proactive so they can work towards getting a job.

YEP recently added two additional programs to its already lengthy list. They added a graphic design work program as well as a student-run thrift shop. They have already seen an array of positive outcomes from the addition of these two programs. In the thrift shop alone, the YEP kids were walking up to customers and shaking hands with them before they politely

addressed any questions they may have. The additions to the program list continue to show kids how they can juggle work and school, and successfully make time for them both.

In the graphics-design program they have a shop where students could produce a variety of art work. The instructor Alberta Wright recently displayed some of the work of the students in the program, including a “Queens of New Orleans” calendar that honored woman who had influenced the designers. To their surprise the calendar displayed so much creativity from the kids that they secured a client with the famous Ace Hotel in New Orleans. Sawyer feels that giving young people the option to be creative is what makes opportunity for them. According to their website, 70% of the youth that participate in these programs are placed into workforce developments and/or employment opportunities. These programs really help the kids that are involved take steps in the right direction to improve their lifestyle.

YEP believes that there is an economic need to create new opportunities for young people. They feel that many of the youth in their program are eager to engage and take on new challenges, but haven’t really figured out how to do that. “When asked what the YEP means to her, Amanda Talbert said, “The Youth Empowerment Project gives youth a sense of hopefulness and confidence. As our name implies, we provide youth with the tools needed to empower themselves and make positive life changes.”

Like most organizations that work with impacting the lives of youth, the YEP hopes that their mentees will eventually come back and become a mentor in their program. So far they have a few members of their staff who were previously kids in their program. For example, Jaleel Holmes joined the YEP when he was 16 years old after being refereed by his juvenile probation officer. Jaleel had felt as though he didn’t have a lot of guidance or support when he initially joined the YEP. After the mentoring and guidance he received, he says, “I was able to overcome

obstacles, look to better myself and my future, and to look forward to things in life.” Jaleel was able to achieve his GED while being a part of the YEP. Now he is working with the program as a staff member. He primarily works with the Youth Futures Initiative. He is able to use some of his experiences from growing up and actually being a member in the program to help some of the youth that are now enrolled. 61% of YEP’s members chose the GED option and finished school.

Darren Aldrige has a very similar story. He joined YEP when he was 18 years old after his judge recommended he join. He was able to earn his GED and then formally joined the organization in 2011 as a staff member and worked as a para-professional. Now he helps others prepare for the GED. Darren believes that being a member who turned into a staff member has helped him connect with current members of the organization.

It is also good for these kids to see that people who were once in their same shoes, taking the same classes, in the same building have made something of themselves and are now successful and making a difference. It makes them more relatable and approachable for those in the organization, especially new members.

YEP fills the void that youth feel when their families aren’t invested in their growth, or for youth who simply don’t have families at all. The organization prides itself on being able to create that type of environment for youth to grow and excel in. Most youth who fall into committing crimes or violent acts are those who didn’t have supervision or families that played a role in their lives. YEP is hoping to break that cycle.

The Youth Empowerment Project is a nonprofit organization. They have a great support system and multiple people and organizations around New Orleans who believe in what they are doing and want to help out. They are able to provide services to the New Orleans community

through their current foundation and agency funders. They have various partnerships throughout the city as well. They have been able to help over 5,000 people in the New Orleans area and 1,200 of those were in 2016 alone. YEP is constantly growing and spreading. Most importantly they have people who have committed their lives to helping change the lives of youth in New Orleans. People like August Collins. Collins has been living in New Orleans for thirteen years and has worked with a variety of at risk youth in the city. He has worked with alternative schools, group homes, mentoring and tracking programs. He has committed his life to helping at-risk youth have a better life. “Hopefully in the next ten years we have better control over gun violence. I know that the city of New Orleans and the people of New Orleans possess a real unique culture. It has to be a big change so that we can have some hope with the amount of gun violence that we encounter,” said Collins.

YEP took steps in the right direction for the change that Collins is talking about. She felt inspired by what she was witnessing in the Juvenile Justice System and was compelled to make a difference. It’s people like Melissa Sawyer who are helping the city of New Orleans change for the better.

YEP provides a safe haven for these kids. They also take in people who are a little older than in most organizations. They don’t cut out the young adults. YEP is focused on helping a wide age range, from helping someone complete homework to just providing some support to a twenty-year-old who is trying to complete their GED. YEP represents a place of change where these kids are able to turn their life around for the better.

Another organization that was started by a local New Orleanian looking for change was Son of a Saint (SOAS), created by Bivian Sonny Lee. SOAS is a mentorship program that works specifically with young boys. Unlike YEP, SOAS members usually join between the ages of ten

and thirteen and participate until they are eighteen. Many of these young boys have lost their fathers to gun violence, incarceration, or natural causes. SOAS is trying to provide tools for these young boys to grow into young men. In order to join the program there is an application that can be filled out. Along with that schools will sometimes recommend boys for the program that are struggling, or SOAS will reach out to a family if they hear about or witness an act of violence and a young boy is involved or affected. Due to this the organization has boys from all over the city of New Orleans.

Lee understands being a fatherless child in New Orleans all too well. He lost his father at a young age and understands how the help of a community can steer a child in the right direction. Despite all the hardships he endured, he still felt inspired to start this organization to help change the lives of so many young boys in New Orleans while also honoring his father who was a former New Orleans Saints player in the 1980s. Lee is the first to recognize how he grew up with not only help from his mother but also mentors and various coaches throughout his life. He is a prime example of how organizations like Son of a Saint can help change someone's life for the better. Son of a Saint views itself, as it explains on its website, as "[a] necessary intervention at a delicate time – a wellspring of positive influence when it's needed most by the boys who need it most. Young mentees forge relationships with volunteer mentors, counselors and tutors that develop over a long period, providing consistent support, guidance and encouragement" (Son of a Saint).

Son of a Saint believes that a young boy growing up without a father impacts their growth and the type of person they will become. For instance, 85% of our youth who become incarcerated are fatherless, and 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes. Bivian Sonny Lee is trying to change those statistics, starting right here in New Orleans. SOAS



uses its mentors to play a male role in the lives of these young boys. There is no way that they can take the place of one of their fathers, but the goal is to have someone who can simply be there for them, and support them when needed.

Son of a Saint was started in January of 2011 with only three mentors and five mentees. Now, six years later, SOAS has forty-five mentors and fifty-two mentees. SOAS reaches young boys from all walks of life with various backgrounds and gives them opportunities they originally did not have. They have various programs for the young men, ranging from educational to recreational. The key goal of this program is to mentor and give emotional support as well as developmental skills to these boys. In doing this, the mentees are exposed to a variety of activities and build lasting relationships with their peers and mentors.

Son of a Saint works with young boys like Ka’Nard Allen who have been victims of gun violence. Ka’Nard is the perfect example of what a lot of kids in New Orleans are going through. He is constantly faced with new challenges each day. The goal is for SOAS to build him up to be a leader so that one day he can bring those kids who are encouraging him to do wrong into the SOAS organization so that they too can be impacted in a positive way. “He’s doing okay and he has his ups and downs, but I can tell you if he did not have us I would be scared of what he would be into now,” said Lee.

Son of a Saint truly speaks to being able to make a difference even though you have a small team. Sonny Lee is the founder; Lauren Darnell is the Director of Partnerships; and Chris Musco is the Director of Programming. They have a board of directors as well who help with partnerships and planning and then of course their mentors. It isn’t a ton of people making an impact in the New Orleans community.

Lee had been working on SOAS alone before it had even expanded to what it is today. He has been a one-man show for some time now. SOAS is in its seventh year and Sonny really kick-started this organization on his own. “I think it’s incredible and a testament to his commitment to this work, and if anything if your passionate about what you are doing it doesn’t matter, you’ll do it at all hours, you will just get up and do it. He’s on the phone constantly with moms who need support or help with parenting etc.” said Darnell.

When asked how he stays so positive doing this work, Lee responded, “It’s hard...I’m not always positive...you’re as strong as your weakest link, so if I’m down for a week then how does that relate to my boys? They will feel it or they will understand it and see it in me, so if I’m preaching to them hey you got to get over this hump, I set the example, our mentors set the example,” said Lee. He often talks about being down for just a few moments and having to get himself out of it because he knows he is constantly being watched by the boys and wants to set a positive example for them.

Lee is able to not only see growth in these boys but gratitude from their mothers. The mothers look to him for hope for their kids and often admire his kind heart and uplifting spirits. Lee is often on the phone at all hours going back and forth with the moms trying to brainstorm ideas with them on how they can keep their kids off the street.

They know that their work is hard, but the members feel as though their work is extremely rewarding. “Anything with a nonprofit is nonprofit. You are working to create opportunities, and it’s a joy to work for this organization, and I believe in making a difference. I don’t take this work lightly, nor does Sonny, and working with someone who understands the burden and greatness of obstacles that lay ahead but approaches everyday with what can we do today is really a gift,” said Darnell.

One of the most important ways that SOAS provides a haven for its members is by giving them a safe space, a clubhouse that is open to them, it in, in many ways, a young boys' paradise. The moment you walk in you are met by a pool table and a view of a few of the guys watching TV or playing video games. There's a mini game room in another room, and naturally a kitchen full of snacks. The house is decorated with large pictures of super heroes in comic book style drawings, as well as pictures of the boys and their mentors. The clubhouse allows the boys to have somewhere to go instead of them hanging out with kids in the neighborhoods who aren't on the same path as them. The mentors are usually their or Sonny to supervise them or hang out as well.

SOAS offers a variety of activities year round for the boys to do such as learning to swim, going horseback riding, learning about slavery, trying new foods they aren't normally exposed to, or simply helping them learn how to drive. The activities take place all over the city of New Orleans with SOAS's various partnerships. All of the activities are open to each boy in the program based on their personal schedule. They try to keep their mentees engaged with fun activities, but they are also extremely serious about education. If the boys aren't doing well at school, they will have to scale back on the number of fun activities that they can participate in.

Son of a Saint has recently partnered with the University of New Orleans Athletic Department. Sonny Lee was a former student at UNO. He was extremely excited to branch out into this new partnership with his alma mater. Partnering with the UNO Athletic Department gives the mentees a lot of different opportunities. For one, they will get a peek of what it is like to be a college student athlete and a look at college life in general. The boys are able to come to the university twice a week to go to study hall with the athletes and receive help with their homework. They also will attend sporting events to experience the game atmosphere, but most

importantly the athletic department holds a number of events where the athletes can build a relationship with the boys and go into detail about the ins and outs of being a college student-athlete. UNO is also one of the most diverse college campuses in the state of Louisiana, so they will be exposed to a variety of students with different backgrounds. In their program they want to build the boys up not only from exposure to entertaining activities, but also teaching them to have goals and be confident within themselves. So many boys have gone from having no idea what they wanted to be when they grew up to wanting to become an engineer or scientist. SOAS takes the high school boys on college tours and help them pinpoint the best place to continue their education.

A big part of all of this is their mentors. SOAS has a great group of mentors that works closely with the boys to ensure that they are growing throughout the program and also have that male figure in their life to keep them on the right track.

Lon Nicholls is a mentor for Son of A Saint. He has been a mentor since the organization first started. He is with Ka’Nard a lot and can tell that his story is yet to be determined. Lon has opened his home to Ka’Nard and tries to take that extra step as a mentor. Lon and a few other mentors recently sat down with Ka’Nard and had to set him back on the right track since he had been hanging out with some people who didn’t have his best interests in mind. “We told him, you know you’re 14 years old, you’re really at the point now where it’s kind of up to you. We are here, we love you, we got you, it’s your decision on where you want to go and what you want to do,” said Nicholls.

Ka’Nard is constantly surrounded by people who may influence him to do the wrong thing. “The cycle starts young. They have these gangs at 13 and 14 and it starts out on social media doing things here or there, and then the next thing you know they are fighting over

something stupid. Someone gets a gun and it just heads down the wrong path,” said Nicholls. The SOAS mentors continuously try to remind the mentees to call a mentor or call one of their SOAS brothers because those are the people they should surround themselves with.

Lon and the other mentors know that Ka’Nard has the potential to be extremely successful in life. He is very smart and intelligent. SOAS expects Ka’Nard to have a bright future as long as he stays on the right track. “There’s probably not many boys his age that have been through so much...it’s heartbreaking but you see him, you see his smile, and you know that he has the potential to determine his own future,” said Nicholls.

Another mentee, David, is trying to turn his life around after falling victim to the effects of having family members incarcerated. His mother is in prison for killing her cousin and his grandmother was an accomplice. David is only in eighth grade and is very bright. He has two sisters and lives with his grandmother. He’s around a lot of women most of the time and due to his involvement with SOAS he is able to get not only the male interaction that he desires but also the chance to do things that he originally didn’t have the opportunity to do. “I am really trying to steer him to take advantage of our private school program, and getting him sponsored to attend one of the schools,” said Nicholls. David recently participated in Operation Upgrade through his school, Jesuit High School, which is an intense five-week program for talented kids around the city. David was the first student from his school ever to be selected to attend.

When asked how the boys are doing and if they are okay, Lon was almost speechless. He knows that it’s hard to constantly see these young boys witness things that people their age should never see, but he hopes that they are learning every day from their experiences with SOAS. “Maybe when they are in certain situations they remember a time when we were at the dinner table and talked about that situation and they reference it and think back to it. I really

think that, that is happening for them. The program is making a difference in their life,” Nicholls shared.

The mentors of SOAS play a huge role in the success of their program. There’s no way to measure the amount of time these mentors have spent with each of these boys. There’s multiple events each week that require them to see the boys, not to mention the amount of phone calls they accept when the boys just want to talk. These mentors get a lot out of the program from the boys as well. As Lon likes to say, “There is no recipe for what a good mentor is or isn’t.” These mentors learn from the boys just as much as the boys learn from them. “I’m totally organic. I’ll call just to say what’s up or what’s going on, do you guys want to go swimming? Ka’Nard and David randomly stopped by the house one day to hang out. Ka’Nard’s mother called and didn’t want him home alone so she asked if it was okay if he came over and I’m like yeah...my wife will get a bunch of snacks and we will just hang out,” Nicholls said.

Each of these mentors has a lot going on and still manages to put time in to these young boy’s lives. Lon has five Pinkberry Frozen Yogurt stores and is a part of the Phillippe’s Restaurant home office team and has a wife, but he feels like he gets a lot out of being with the guys as well. “I get as much out of it as they get out of it. You’ll see it in SOAS mentee Errol and wow you can be proud of the young man he is, even SOAS mentee Quinten. I am proud of remembering what they were like four years ago and what they are like now,” Lon said, referring to some of the boys he has mentored over the years.

Most people wonder how these mentors are able to keep coming back after they have heard the stories of these young men. “I am 38 years old and they have experienced more in their short lives than I have experienced...it’s crazy,” said Nicholls. With that said, Nicholls is a believer in the effects of positivity and it being contagious. He knows that if he consistently has a

positive outlook on life that it will then roll of onto the boys. “You can only spend a couple of hours or a day with these boys and the majority of the time you’re not with them, and you just hope that the moments you get is enough to keep that positive energy going,” Nicholls shared.

Many New Orleans residents are aware of the dangers of gun violence, and they are able to see the impact it has on children each and every day. SOAS is encouraging more people in the city to get involved and join the movement to stop the cycle. “If you have an issue with gun violence or what’s going on in this city, do something about it. It doesn’t take much to be a mentor or get involved. It’s just showing interest in somebody, and that’s the way SOAS is set up, it’s a group setting,” Nicholls said. SOAS knows that you can make an impact in these boys’ lives just by sitting down and talking to them for a few minutes. In the city many people are pointing out the issues with youth but not enough people are working to solve the problems. SOAS is focused on doing just that.

Justice Winslow is a professional basketball player for the Miami Heat. He came to work with SOAS and was immediately touched by the boys and their stories. He quickly related to them, but most importantly they found a friend in him. “I see how they interact with him, they play video games or dodge ball, you learn so much from someone through activities and sporting activities, and I think he really saw how the boys interact with each other,” said Lee. As Lon Nicholls often says “there is no recipe on how to be a great mentor,” but SOAS feels as though Justice Winslow instantly became a great mentor from the way that he smiled and engaged with each and every child. “He’s just like a regular person. He made it to the NBA, but he’s just like us. Always be humble about your situation, that’s what I took from Justice,” said Errol. Quinten is an aspiring videogame engineer and is constantly working on improving his coding skills.

From watching Justice Winslow, he saw his work ethic and is now trying to apply that same drive to achieving his own personal goals.

Aside from the serious mentor involvement in this organization, SOAS encourages the boys in the organization to be involved in extracurricular activities at school, and a lot of the mentors will support them in the activities that they have chosen. A handful of the boys play football, and their mentors will go out to their games to support them. The people behind SOAS believe that the organization fills a need that cannot be ignored. They understand that the life of these young boys who lose their fathers and have witnessed a lot of things kids their age shouldn't see is going to be a constant battle. These kids go through the normal stages of grief just as an adult would. They feel pain and experience a lot of anger. SOAS strives to impact these boys and show them an alternative way to address their emotions from the things that they may have seen in their community.

SOAS really focuses on the things that these kids may not be receiving in the areas that they are from such as going to the zoo, or learning about insects at the insectarium, taking etiquette classes, and knowing how to dress appropriately for an interview. This organization is trying to change the trajectory of "what should be" to "what could be" for these young men. Many of the boys have expressed how grateful they feel that this organization was started and that they are members. A lot of the boys wouldn't be exposed to some of the things that they have been if it wasn't for SOAS.

Quinten is another mentee in SOAS. His father is not in the picture, and he is living with a single mother who works a full-time job. Before joining the program Quinten had anger problems and wasn't really motivated to do anything. Quinten is one of the mentees who has been with SOAS since the beginning. He often talks about how much meeting Sonny and being a



part of this organization means to him. Aside from all of the activities that they do, he feels that Sonny just being there and being a father figure has been more than enough. “When I first joined SOAS I was not the person that I am today. My grades were everywhere, my behavior was everywhere, and when I met Mr. Sonny, he brought me back down to earth. He was really like a father figure to me, and because of that I was able to do so much more just having a man that I could rely on in my life. Mr. Sonny is like a saint to me at this point, he’s a Godsend,” said Quinten.

By taking these kids off the streets and keeping them enrolled in extracurricular activities, SOAS helps them develop other ideas of themselves besides wanting to be the tough guy in the neighborhood who scares people because of his weapons, but a lot of them now feel the desire to make something of themselves, and accomplish what most people didn’t think they could. Damaiyuran Compton aspires to go to Texas A&M and major in engineering. Josh White aspires to be a chemical engineer and has envisioned himself going to play collegiate football at Texas Tech. Each of the members of SOAS have set goals for themselves or now see themselves doing things that once before didn’t seem possible, and that is what it is all about, providing an alternative to the gun and showing youth that the world has other things to offer. The things they learn through SOAS show them that they can be powerful in a way that doesn’t have to be violent and harmful to others.

“Son of a Saint means to me deep down in my heart that it takes a boy from a dark place to a place of light and hope. I don’t want to sound corny but it really does. Without Son of a Saint I really don’t know where I would be,” said Quinten.

One of the biggest aspects of SOAS is the family atmosphere that it has created. These boys go from feeling hopeless and alone to finding friends in the organization they can lean on.

Some momentarily forget the stresses of the world around them and are able to just be kids.

“Whenever we are with each other it’s like our fathers not being there, the thought just disappears. We are just bonding and trying to get to know each other and have fun,” said mentee Errol. “They feel like my brothers, we fight, we bicker, and we love each other. There’s nothing more that I can wish for,” added Quinten.

When someone sees you giving up their free time to work with you and make sure your day is a little brighter, people take more away from that experience, and that seems to be true with SOAS. “I see change in kids, I see them start to smile a lot more, I see them suggesting things to do, and engaging with their brothers in the program a lot more, trusting more. I see those things, and that’s very positive for me,” said Lee.

SOAS is a nonprofit organization, and a major question is how are they able to fund and provide for these kids the way that they do. SOAS has a very rich schedule of events throughout the year with their various partners around New Orleans. For example, during Saints season they partner with Cellar Door and host a Saints pregame mixer and with the proceeds going back to their organization. “We try to offer unique experiences for people to engage with us,” said Lauren Darnell, who is the Director of Partnerships. The goal of these events is to grab people’s attention so that while they are at one of these events “partying with a purpose,” they learn about what the organization does and whom it helps while also donating to them at the same time.

They have a wide variety of activities for the boys involved in the organization as well as help with funding tuition at certain private schools in the New Orleans area. A large portion of their funding comes from small businesses around the city that do recurring gifts or small gifts. The majority of their budget is “in kind,” meaning that different groups or business around the city will provide them with a free experience for their boys to attend. “As far as scholarships,

those specifically we apply for half of that from the state, and we've been successful with that," said Lee. Usually after they receive money from the state SOAS will reach out to their donors and supporters for the other half.

The organization is fortunate to have so many people in the city who support them and what they are doing, and can help them fund essential things for the boys. They even have a partnership with a driving school to help these young boys get their permits or license. The organization covers a lot of ground.

Bivian Sonny Lee has committed his life to impacting the lives of the youth in New Orleans. Son of a Saint touches a new, New Orleanian each and every day. Sonny Lee may be the son of a former Saints player, but he has also proven himself to be a true New Orleans Saint.

The commitment of Melissa Sawyer and Sonny Lee do not go unnoticed by the New Orleans community. Both of these organizations have received support from people all over the city. In fact, Son of a Saint has almost the entire Saints football team backing them in a series of events that bring awareness to what they do and their goals.

Aside from the many thanks they receive from the kids in their programs and their families, Sawyer and Lee both received citywide recognition for the hard work that they do to make a difference in the lives of New Orleans youth. The Gambit awarded Melissa Sawyer with the female New Orleanian of the Year award in 2016, and Sonny Lee won male 'New Orleanian of the Year for 2016. The criteria for these awards have remained the same since 1983. The honoree must be someone who made a positive difference in the preceding year. According to the Gambit website, "The efforts of these organizations and others — and their leaders — inspire

not only the many at-risk young people of New Orleans, but all of us who want to see those young people succeed.

The reality of gun violence in New Orleans is daunting. Yet, organizations like SOAS and YEP are making a difference. These organizations show a way forward for youth who otherwise may feel hopeless. They offer a glimpse at an alternative reality, where guns aren't used to enforce the laws of the streets, and where young boys and girls have a chance to grow into fully realized men and women. Most importantly these organizations provide a sense of community for this city. It is through people like Sonny Lee, Melissa Sawyer, and Tamara Jackson who took a simple vision and turned it into something that has effected youth in the city in so many positive ways that the trajectory of what takes place in New Orleans will change.

One of the most positive outcomes from the success of all of these programs is that the youth who are members eventually will come back and become mentors, or will in some way, shape, or form make an impact in another young person's life for the better. These organizations are trying to impact lives the right way and creating a positive cycle.

According to nola.com there have already been 100 murders in New Orleans this year, and 16 of the incidents involved kids under the age of 20. New Orleans only had a total of 175 murders in 2016. These organizations are making a difference but the need for volunteers becomes clearer each and every day. There is strength and numbers and YEP and SOAS are two organizations that have started to lead the city of New Orleans in the right direction.

## VITA

The author was born in Austin, Texas. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in film, theater, and communication arts, with a minor in journalism from the University of New Orleans in 2015. She joined the University of New Orleans English graduate program to pursue a Masters in professional writing.