

Saunders:

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Target them at an early age  
BARRY SAUNDERS, Staff Writer

**The noise from the helicopter overhead nearly drowned out Gail Neely's voice as she told her seven kids to come inside for their twice-weekly meeting.**

Neely and the boys shared a knowing look and trudged into the Lyon Park Community Center. The seven boys, ages 13 to 17, were part of a first-year program called "**Teens on Target**" that tries to teach them about violence and how to prevent and avoid it.

They knew the police helicopter was looking for Laurence Lovette Jr., a suspect in the killing of UNC student body president Eve Carson.

"We had a brief discussion," she said. "They worried about how that" -- having a suspect for such a crime presumably living in their neighborhood -- "would make people look at Durham and them. They felt that people didn't think Durham was safe."

The boys are not Neely's biological children, but when she talks about them, it's hard to tell. They are just as precious to her as if they were, she said. "I love these kids," she said. "They really are wonderful kids. They want the same things as everyone else: to graduate, to get a job and contribute to their communities."

The **Teens on Target** program was started in California in 1998, but this is its first year in Durham. It is funded by the Kirby Foundation, started by a local family that contributes to programs it deems worthwhile.

"We have a basic curriculum on violence and how to prevent it," Neely said. During the school-semester-long program, she said, they address issues of violence related to gangs, guns, young people and domestic, among other types.

Neely said she was initially skeptical about how she'd be received by the members of the group, five of whom are black, two white. "I'm an old white woman," she said. "What kind of credibility do I have?"

A lot, apparently.

Sue Baker, president of the board of **North Carolinians Against Gun Violence**, and Neely, its assistant director, said the students' grades in school have improved since they started attending the meetings and they all seem committed to making a positive impact in their neighborhoods.

That's because, Neely said, "We try to show them, as Gandhi said, that they should be the change they want to see."

Baker, unlike most people who've witnessed the recent arrests of Demario Atwater and Lovette Jr. for Carson's death, sounded a sympathetic tone when referring to them. "I look at those two boys and wonder 'What could anyone have done?' to prevent them from reaching the point where they thought killing the young woman was an option.

Maybe nothing. But if anything can be done, it'll start with people such as Baker, Neely and us addressing the needs of young children.