

Containing Hillside violence will take more than words

Near the end of Spike Lee's "Clockers," a policeman likens a drug-infested housing project to "a self-cleaning oven."

"No fuss, no mess," a colleague replies as he zips a dead drug dealer into a body bag.

Have Duluth police adopted the same attitude toward Central Hillside? Consider the department's comments at the outset of its investigation of the Stanley Boody murder, described from the start as a drug deal gone bad:

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as a ... deal gone bad.

"Unless you're involved in that ... world, you don't have to be concerned with that kind of violence coming your way," Sgt. Bob Shene explained in a News Tribune story ("Police say shooting is 'puzzling,'" June 17). A related department news release urged additional calm, stressing that "the general public is at no greater safety risk now than they normally would be because of this incident."

While most understand these comments were meant to soothe rattled psyches while the police conducted an investigation, they also fed some false assumptions and unhealthy attitudes within our community.

The first is the assumption that crimes of this type and its effects exist in a closed circuit between the perpetrators and their associates. The "bad apples" get what's coming to them while we "good apples" have nothing to fear as long as we stay out of "that ... world." Reassuring? Yes. But effective only as long as the dealers continue to have the courtesy to confine their gunplay to the insides of their own homes.

Consider the couple who witnessed the tail end of the June 14 incident after the sound of gunshots drew them onto their front porch. If Boody, shot, had crawled outside, prompting a second bullet from the alleged shooter, Spencie Walker, and the couple had witnessed that shot, the situation would likely have been less self-contained. The couple stepped outside, presumably, because they care about what goes on in their neighborhood and because they wanted to help someone who might have been in trouble. Was that what Sgt. Shene meant by "involved"?

The second assumption was that drug-related murders are somehow less abhorrent than the "random" school shootings and workplace assaults conducted by the occasional psychopath. This rhetoric has appeared before in the Duluth Police Department's communications. Have we in Duluth really gotten to the point where we'll gladly brush off a few homicides among the riff-raff in exchange for the relief that a gun-toting wacko isn't on the loose? The gunman wasn't looking to kill any of us — just the people he thinks tried to screw him in a drug deal. What a relief!

When people in Duluth start shooting each other for any reason — even marijuana, as alleged

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in this case — it may be wiser to focus on what is going on, and why, as opposed to what isn't.

The third problem was the suggestion — however subtle or unintended — that residents should view the deaths of those involved in crime as somehow less tragic or troubling if they 1) don't look like you, 2) live like you, or 3) keep the same company as you.

The public outpouring of affection for Boody, however troubled he may have been, should confirm the tragedy here. The message: This violence is someone else's problem. How can we steer clear of "that kind of violence"? Avoid getting involved with people like Boody and Walker, apparently.

Duluthians owe the police our every thanks for investigating this complex case and for doing what is often a difficult and thankless job. But statements like Sgt. Shene's will make officers' jobs harder, not easier. Indirectly, they cultivate a tolerance among the public — in exchange for a false sense of security — for what remains a very grisly sort of crime. This violence erodes what constitutes "normal" with regard to public safety. They also encourage us to disconnect ourselves from what happens in our communities and avoid getting involved.

Just ask the residents of Minneapolis or Chicago. How many of them do you think come out of their houses at the sound of gunfire? Is that the kind of community we're shooting for here in Duluth?

For these reasons, the police department may want to choose its words more carefully when discussing cases of violent crime. They should acknowledge the public-safety implications of such incidents and use them as opportunities to call for everyone to step up — either through attending beat meetings, organizing neighborhood watches or calling tip lines — as opposed to encouraging us all to relax and pretend that "that ... world" is somehow separate from the one we all share.

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