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WAMO Stops the Music to Talk About Stopping Violence

By Adrian McCoy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's unusual for a radio station to break from its format, but WAMO-FM (106.7) did it Monday night with a one-hour forum on ways to stem the tide of violence in city communities.

WAMO parent company Sheridan Broadcasting has made these kinds of forums part of its corporate mission. "We're in the entertainment business, but also the information business," said Sheridan general manager Ron Davenport Jr. the day after the broadcast. "What does it mean to be a good citizen? How do we take back the streets? We have a powerful vehicle to make sure those issues are raised. This is one step among many steps we can take, and others can take as well, to make sure the issues are raised."

"Stop the Music/Stop the Violence" featured representatives from law enforcement and community groups working to fight violent crime. They included Pittsburgh Police Cmdr. Maurita Bryant, Sgt. LaVonnie Bickerstaff of the Pittsburgh Police witness protection program and Richard Garland, director of Allegheny County's One Vision One Life violence prevention program.

Other speakers had experienced tragedy firsthand: Valerie Dixon of the Center for Victims of Violent Crime and Debra Germany of Divine Intervention Ministries both lost sons to street violence in the past few years. Germany talked about the pain of having to identify her only son's body. "I just want to speak to a young man out there and ask you to please never put your mother in that place," Germany told listeners.

Garland also spoke from a firsthand perspective: He used to be a gang member who has turned his life around and now works to help others to do the same.

The program also addressed the role of music and movies in the culture of violence. One caller commended the station for airing the special, but questioned what it was worth if young people would turn on a radio a few hours later and hear a hip-hop song that glorified violence.

Host KiKi noted that she had done a phone interview with rapper Corey "C-Murder" Miller minutes before the "Stop the Music" special started. Miller is awaiting trial in the shooting death of a 16-year-old. "He's calling me from a jail cell. Of course, his main goal is to pump up his album. As a radio station, we need to talk about that."

WAMO's play list steers clear of music that glorifies violence or is demeaning to women, Davenport says. At the same time, he acknowledges, "That's the nature of the industry. We try to keep it as true to the music, and as clean for the community, as possible."

There was consensus among panelists that the solution to the problems of community violence is for parents to be more involved with their kids and give them role models other than the ones they may encounter among peers, and for people to stop being afraid to go to the police with information that may help to solve or to prevent a crime.

"The police aren't the enemy. Every time we take a gun off the street, we're preventing crimes, injuries and the possibility of another homicide," Bryant said. "We cannot do it alone. It's where you live. You want to make it safe, we'll help you make it safe. But we need your help and your input."

Issues like these are addressed on a regular basis on talk radio – especially on sister station WAMO-AM (860), which airs a nightly talk show aimed at the African-American community.

But on the FM station, which is among the top-rated stations among younger listeners at night, a program like this has the potential to preach far beyond the choir loft.

WAMO plans to air similar specials every three months. The next will explore the problem of domestic violence. The station has also posted links to the organizations represented at Monday's program on its Web site: www.wamo.com/communityevents.

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