



## A Time of Crisis, A Moment for Art: Sojourn Theatre and the Lima Senior High Dialogue Project

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Animating  
**Democracy**

A Program of **Americans for the Arts**

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COVER IMAGE, “IT’S ALWAYS BLACK AND WHITE BENEATH THE SURFACE” BY MIKE HUFFMAN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.  
 IMAGES THROUGHOUT CASE STUDY HAVE BEEN DRAWN FROM LIMA SENIOR HIGH DIALOGUE PROJECT MONOLOGUES.

## PROLOGUE

For more than four decades, thousands of residents of the City of Lima, Ohio and surrounding Allen County have been engaged in their community through the arts. They have been involved in arts-in-education programs with visiting artists. They have participated in arts projects promoting downtown design and arts infrastructure. In recent years, they have also been involved in arts projects to address community issues such as race and trust among civic leaders through dialogue and action.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it was not incidental that in the winter of 2008 the community turned to Sojourn Theatre and to art to respond to a tragic occurrence and its aftermath. This case study documents the Lima Senior High Dialogue Project. It outlines the story behind the response and the role that art and artists, familiar to and working with the community, can play in a crisis. It shares lessons learned that can be considered by other communities facing their own crises and issues.

The story begins in January 2008 when a member of the Lima Police SWAT team inadvertently killed a biracial mother of six children in a house drug raid. Lima community members were enraged. Lima Senior High School students couldn't stop talking about it in school, and administrators wanted them to have a safe and thoughtful way to talk about the unrest.

Lima City Schools approached Allen County Common Threads, a locally based volunteer group promoting arts-based civic dialogue, and Sojourn Theatre Company—which had implemented previous significant projects in Lima—to partner on a dialogue project that would help students process and respond to a community-wide race-related crisis. Both groups are experienced in arts-based dialogue, a familiar tool for addressing issues in the Lima schools and community at large.

The three partners assiduously planned and completed the project in one month. Sojourn interviewed students, and wrote, performed, and recorded theatrical monologues expressing student perspectives on both the incident and the racial tensions exposed by it. With the monologues to be used as catalyst for dialogue, Common Threads recruited and trained facilitators and staged facilitated small group dialogue sessions for Lima Senior High students. The Lima Senior High School hosted the dialogues, prepared the students and parents, and assisted with the dialogue sessions.

This case study illustrates how the importance of defined expertise and roles, strong prior relationships among partners, familiarity of residents in addressing community issues through art, and in-depth community involvement enabled Lima and Allen County to respond effectively to a crisis with an arts intervention.

The study also describes the challenges of the fast pace dictated by the crisis—too little time to recruit and fully train dialogue facilitators, to involve teachers and parents, and to develop the first action steps in response to student feedback. However, the investment by the partners in the project, the concern of the community for itself and its youth, and the participation of the students ensured that the project achieved its goals.

You will find in this case study detailed documentation of the need, the response, the planning, the project, and its immediate effects. It contains reflections by core organizers, the text of Sojourn monologues, and descriptions of the artistic and dialogue processes.

<sup>1</sup> Martie MacDonell, a founder of Common Threads, has been instrumental in instigating programming in Lima and Allen County that embeds multicultural issues and the arts in community building. See Appendices for more information on programming in Allen County.

## CRISIS AND THE CALL FOR AN ARTS-BASED RESPONSE

### Police Raid Gone Wrong

At approximately 8:00 p.m. on January 4, 2008, the Lima Police Department's Special Weapons and Tactics Team entered the home of Tarika Wilson to serve a search warrant to her companion, Anthony Terry, who was suspected of drug dealing. Moments later, Sergeant Joseph Chavalía fatally shot Wilson and injured her one-year-old son, Sincere Wilson.

Wilson was unarmed in an upstairs bedroom with her six children, ages one to eight years old. While holding her son, Wilson was shot twice in the torso; Sincere was shot in the shoulder and finger.

Terry was found downstairs. Police arrested and charged him with suspicion of possession of crack cocaine, which was found in the home during the search, and held him in the Allen County jail. The raid was the culmination of an investigation that began in September 2007 with drug buys made of Terry by the Lima Police Department.

During Chavalía's trial in July 2008 on charges of negligent homicide and negligent assault, Chavalía stated that as he walked upstairs he saw a figure pop back and forth in the doorway and, in the same moment, he heard gunfire. He thought someone was trying to shoot him. Rather, two officers on the first floor had shot two pit bull dogs that were attacking them. A jury found Chavalía not guilty.

### A Community in Crisis

Following the shooting, Lima residents responded with outpourings of anger and resentment, and racial tension rose. Many demanded answers from the Lima Police Department to justify the use of force. Wilson was biracial, Terry was black, and Chavalía was white.

On January 5, around 100 people gathered at the Cheryl Allen Southside Center to hold a candlelight vigil for Wilson and distribute "We Want Justice for Tarika Kay Wilson Right Now" flyers. On January 6, Sixth Ward Councilman Derry Glenn held a media conference with Wilson's mother, the director of Cheryl Allen Southside Center, and a representative of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from Dayton. On January 7, the Lima City Council moved its routine bi-weekly meeting to Lima Senior High School to accommodate the growing audience. Everyone that requested the 'privilege of the floor' had the opportunity to speak. Also, the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and area black ministers held a press conference on January 7 and afterward met with Mayor David Berger and Police Chief Greg Garlock at Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church.

Media conferences and community meetings of all kinds occurred at a constant pace for the next month. Over the three Saturdays following the shooting, people marched to the police department to demand justice. The *Lima News* published one to two articles and letters to the editor on a daily basis for the month of January and nearly every day in February.

"There was enormous unrest, community forums that often melted down into a wide-ranging set of charges against the police...rumors were rampant...The chaos, the sense of things really being tumultuous, was very high."

—Mayor David Berger

As described by Berger, the Lima Police Department requested various investigations by the Ohio Attorney General's Office, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Defiance County Prosecutor Jeffery Strausbaugh, and the Montgomery County Sheriff's office. Berger also recalled, "All of these outside agencies refused for their own reasons to share information. This went on for months and added to the rumor mill. It was a very, very difficult situation."

The incident gained national attention. At the invitation of the Black Ministerial Alliance, Reverend Jesse Jackson visited Lima on February 11 with a full schedule of meetings and two speeches—one for students at Lima Senior High and another for the general public at the Philippians Missionary Baptist Church.

Three vivid points of view heard in conversations with community members were:<sup>2</sup>

"Some members of the white community felt it was a public safety issue, a consequence of hosting criminal behavior in the home, and/or the black community was playing the race card.

"For some they thought it was a tragedy for all involved. Some thought the incident was not about race.

"For some African Americans and others, this incident was a disregard for blacks in the community. It reflected racism and was part of an overall historic pattern of behavior."

### **Recognizing the Need**

Early in January—while some in the community were expressing their rage about Wilson's death in protests, marches, and media conferences—Jeff McClellan, principal of the School of Multiple Intelligences within Lima Senior High School, was overseeing the school's routine winter intersession, a two-day program that invites community members to share information about their occupations. McClellan observed a discussion session with students led by firefighters Chris Jackson and Warren Pughsley. "It wasn't five minutes into the conversation, and someone made a reference to the police," McClellan said. "Jackson and Pughsley, both Lima firefighters, both African American, and both prominent in the students' lives at the high school, said to me, 'Look, these students need to talk about this.' I also heard this same thing from other presenters. I realized we needed to find a way for students to process it in their own way. We needed to have students talk about this in the presence of adults."

Then Daniel Hughes—assistant director of Allen Metropolitan Housing Authority, young member of the Black Ministerial Alliance, and advisor and friend of McClellan—visited McClellan and told him "that the community was divided along racial lines, and he didn't know if that was going to spill over into the schools or not, but it seemed like there should be an opportunity to have a conversation with the youth. Often that voice isn't heard. The community was having this conversation and the youth were looking on."

<sup>2</sup> These points of view were summarized by John Lensen, a board member of Sojourn Theatre Company who visited Lima February 11-13 to counsel Sojourn, Common Threads, and Lima City Schools personnel in their mutual effort to address this crisis through art-based small group dialogue. Lensen had spent 20 years with the Oregon Department of Education and is now a consultant with school districts around the Pacific Northwest on civil rights issues.

Hughes remembered his first experience with Common Threads dialogue in 1999 at Bluffton University. “I was amazed at this very diverse group of people together in one room. I’ll never forget that—seeing everyone in one room discussing community issues. At that time, the topic was trust among leaders.”

McClellan went to talk with his supervisor, Lima City Schools Superintendent Karel Oxley. He told her what he had observed in students and what he had heard from his advisors. Oxley understood the students needed to process the activities around them. McClellan sought “to create a safe harbor for students to share what they were feeling and to have that common vessel, so to speak, to share their experiences,” she said. She realized that the students all brought their own images of what had happened in January, and it was important for students to hear different perspectives from their peers.

Sally Windle, director of arts and magnet programs in the Lima City Schools, remembers that “Common Threads and Michael Rohd, [artistic director of Sojourn Theatre Company], came up during a conversation, and those of us who had experienced their work before immediately thought this was a good way to process the situation in the schools.” (See Appendix C for a history of civic dialogue, and the interaction with Common Threads and Sojourn, in Lima.)

The culmination of these conversations occurred on January 21. Oxley moved decisively and approached Martie MacDonell of Common Threads and asked if the organization would help with a student dialogue project at Lima Senior High School. Oxley also asked MacDonell to invite Rohd and his company to Lima to make art that would catalyze the student conversations. MacDonell approached Hughes for his leadership and support from the Black Ministerial Alliance and checked with her Common Threads partner Judy Gilbert and others. The consensus was, “Of course we will do this. Our community is in crisis.”

### **Sojourn Decides**

Rohd deliberated over whether his skills could be genuinely helpful to the situation. The Sojourn schedule left no time for the project, but he felt a relationship with and a responsibility to his partners in Lima. Before he committed to the project, he asked for the names of the people he needed to talk to before making a decision.

“Wow, there is no way I want to go into a community in a moment of crisis unless the people I’m going to engage with want to have us there,” Rohd recalls thinking. “There would need to be a shared understanding of what we would do and what the goals of such a project would be. I wanted to feel that existed on the ground before we would set foot in the community. In a tough time, the last thing you want are some outsiders poking or prodding around for an unrelated reason of their own.”

Rohd talked by phone with McClellan, who would manage the project within the school. Rohd felt that McClellan was interested in doing something authentic and wanted to create an opportunity for connection and conversation. When Rohd heard that, he said, “That made me feel we could partner and make something worthwhile. [McClellan] seemed to have a passion for the possibility that the arts could be a positive here.”

When Rohd talked with Hughes, he learned that the ministerial group was working hard to calm tensions and Hughes felt that the school was a place that needed an outlet and was a way to have a safe public dialogue. “He took on advocating for us in the black church community and helped make

connections for us. He really had a lot to do with welcoming us and making sure folks on all sides of the conversation were happy to have us here. I had to be confident in that from him before we would come. He was clear. It would be a good thing if we came.”

What was most important to Rohd was to talk to the students, because everyone was talking about a school-based project. “[McClellan] put a group of students in a room on a speakerphone. That was the clincher for me. We had a frank, funny, serious conversation. I said, ‘We’ve been asked to come in and do interviews with you to create a piece. It would be used for dialogue in your school. Do you want us to come? Would that be a good thing?’ Most of the students said, ‘Yes, come now—we could really use this.’ One of the students said, ‘Yeah. Yeah. That would be cool because we wouldn’t be watching each other. We’d watch people who have come to know us. You should come.’ I left that phone call thinking, if that is the case, we can start arranging this... And of course, I was talking the whole time to John Lensen, who’s a board member of ours, a good friend, and a real expert in education, diversity, civil rights, and crisis issues.”



### **Partners Hit the Ground Running**

On January 25, Lima City Schools administrators, Common Threads team members, and Hughes convened at Lima Senior High School to plan for student dialogues, with Rohd available by telephone. McClellan set a goal of having everything completed within a month. With specific components of the project decided upon, the team turned to logistics, quickly identifying the nuts and bolts of the project, outlining a timetable, addressing a myriad of what looked like overwhelming logistical issues. The planning team agreed not to publicize the project in an effort to create a comfortable and private environment for the students.

The project was underway with three distinct components, and each partner worked simultaneously on its tasks over the next three weeks:

**Sojourn** would interview 60 students; write, perform, and record brief monologues designed to prompt student dialogue and that authentically represented student voices; help the planning team with dialogue questions; and help orient educators and other leaders new to arts-based civic dialogue during a three day residency from February 11–13.

**Common Threads** would gain the support of the African American community; locate financial resources to host Sojourn and cover its expenses; recruit and train 100 volunteer facilitators; decide on the questions to prompt students to express their views; and manage the small group dialogues for 1,200 students over four school days.

**Lima Senior High School** would manage the logistical needs of hosting Sojourn and Common Threads at the school, as well as communicate and prepare educators, students, and parents about the planned dialogues.

“The greatest challenge in this project was the time constraint,” Gilbert recalls. “It was the first time Common Threads methods were used to respond to a serious incident and timing was important.” They worked simultaneously over the next 21 days to complete the monologues and dialogue sessions.

## PREPARING FOR THE ARTS-BASED DIALOGUES

### Sojourn’s Artistic Process

#### *Clarifying goals*

Sojourn agreed to join the dialogue project because students and community members had collaboratively identified very clear goals:

Make a space for students to be heard and valued, one at a time.

Reflect back what was learned in those one-on-one encounters with the student population in anonymous, thoughtful ways.

Synthesize diverse and challenging perspectives into a manageable array of voices that will help make difficult dialogues possible.

Rohd talked about issues raised from the incident. “We had to decide as a group, are the conversations going to be about the shooting? Or are they going to be about race, class, perception? Or are they going to be a mix? What would be used as a catalyst? That became the ongoing conversation.”

After much planning, Sojourn arranged to come to Lima as a group of seven: Rohd; company members Jono Eiland and Courtney Davis; board member John Lenssen; and three of Rohd’s undergraduate theater students from Northwestern University—Aurelia Clunie, Reggie Gowland, and Adam Welton. They represented a similar racial and gender diversity as Lima Senior High School, which was important to the project. Lenssen was included for his skills related to civil rights issues and as a resource for school administrators and civic leaders.

#### *Getting informed*

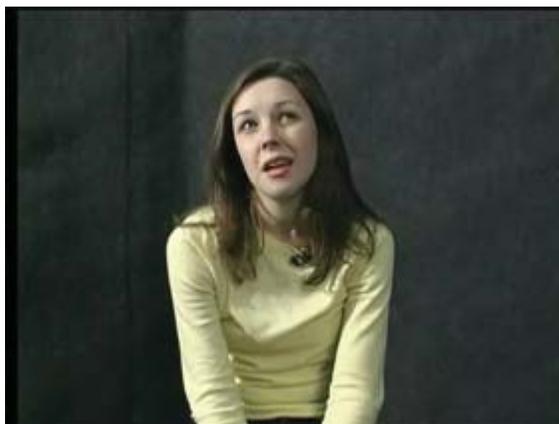
Rohd describes how Sojourn prepared to create the art to prompt the student dialogues. “We came together in Chicago and had a couple of research sessions.” For background material, Common Threads had sent local media clippings and a transcript of the Ohio Attorney General’s hours-long local hearing on the shooting incident. The hearing was rife with stories from young and old citizens, mainly African Americans, who told about police brutalities and profiling over a span of 40 years or more.

“We were reading the daily newspaper and following the online blog,” Rohd remembers. “It was pretty intense and ugly. There were thousands and thousands of entries. We read the commentary and editorials. We met and discussed our prior four projects and experiences in Lima to catch others up and to talk about what was going on now. We talked about interview and composing techniques.”

Gowland recalls how they learned the Sojourn method of interviewing. “We discussed ways for the high school students to express their true opinions. None of the kids had met us before. Even though we were strangers to them, there was an element of safety because we were strangers. ‘I don’t know you. You don’t know me. We are going to talk about what it’s like to be at this school. I won’t judge you. You won’t judge me.’ We will try to create as much trust as we can. [Rohd] spoke a lot about getting students to provide real opinions rather than bottled answers. On the way there in the car we practiced interviews.”

The Sojourn team arrived in Lima on February 10. They immediately met with McClellan, toured the school, and visited the rooms where each actor would be interviewing students the following day. After a quick logistics check, McClellan and Sojourn were ready to roll.

“When we arrived at the high school, we met students one-on-one,” Gowland remembers. “We told them we are a theater company based in Oregon, and some of us are students at Northwestern University. We had been hearing about everything that was happening in Lima with the shooting. We had been invited to the school to talk about their feelings. What were their reactions? How did it reflect on the school? We told them that we were very curious. We wanted to learn more about their situation at the time.”



#### **Creating the monologues**

Rohd describes the process of creating the monologues for the Lima Senior High student dialogues. “Working with [McClellan] ahead of time, we agreed we’d have six people doing interviews around the school. We all had a separate interview room, and [McClellan’s] responsibility was to work with faculty to identify a group of diverse students

by age, gender, ethnicity, the social clique spectrum, and how well they did in school. We wanted a real cross section of students. Each person met with four to six students for a 30 to 45 minute one-on-one recorded interview.

“At the end of each day, we went to the hotel...and went at it a couple of different ways. We talked about what we heard, what was most interesting...particularly in terms of a point of view. Then we started naming the points of view—like angry, scared—and these would be a placeholder. We’d start writing on a board the ways we’d categorize. We’d discover, wow—these look a lot like those. Why don’t we put these together? That seems like a pretty clear point of view.

“Then we would assign them. People would go off with their recordings and [bring] back 20 riffed monologues that they improvised for the whole room. Then I’d pick six I’d want to go forward with, and that represented the day’s work...Then the performers would go back and work on a more streamlined monologue—listening from the recordings, their own recollections, and imagination. They’d...e-mail them to me, and I’d start working on them as a writer...The next day we’d go through the same exact process. At the end of the second day, we had 12. Then John Lenssen was more instrumental at this point.”

“We wanted a combination of voices that were honest, that had a balance that had complexity—not uniformity, that offered questioning, and that each student could find a voice that resonated—a mirror.”

—John Lenssen

“We needed a really good spread of racial diversity, gender, ideological diversity, and response diversity. [Lenssen] helped us hone in on those six [monologues]. We all talked about it. We argued about it, profusely even. Then I did another pass of tightening and synthesizing them,” said Rohd.

During this process, Welton, an African American drama student, was taking in the whole experience. “[Rohd] was the best. He was very respectful to all of us and our opinions. He listened to everything we had to say. When you’ve got six or seven powerful people to collaborate on one idea, the process could have been brutal, but it was very welcoming. I felt I could express myself very well if I had a different opinion,” Welton said.

On the second night, Rohd recalls McClellan came in and listened to some of the monologues. “He cried some in the room,” Rohd said. “I think he couldn’t believe the disenfranchisement that some of the students felt. He was very nervous about what the superintendent would think about the text. When Jeff told her what they were about that evening, [Oxley] was very concerned. There was talk about should we change stuff. We had made an arrangement with [McClellan] that they couldn’t change stuff without our consent. We knew we were going to be pretty intent about what we saw as the truth of the student’s voices. Nothing was changed.”

McClellan recalled his conversation with Oxley. “It is one of the things I respect about her. On any issue, we would talk things out. *Then* a decision would be made. She trusted me enough to share her concerns. When you think about it, given her position, it’s not unusual that you’d have a concern. She did the right thing.”

At the beginning of the third day, the actors videotaped the monologues. “That took hours to get right,” explained Rohd. “Everyone did multiple takes. I really wanted them to not be fully memorized. I wanted the feel that they were being discovered. They were being spoken just like what happened when you were being interviewed. [McClellan] printed out each monologue in giant text. While one actor performed, two actors held cue cards. The takes were not edited. We chose one take and those were burned to a DVD.”

“John Lenssen and I chose the order of the monologues,” Rohd continued. “We certainly didn’t want to start with the harshest one. We wanted to go back and forth on race so there is not anyone potentially excluded. You want to have mirror moments and window moments. You don’t want the audience to go too long without a mirror moment.”

When asked if the work in Lima felt any different from the other projects Sojourn has done, Eiland, a founding member of Sojourn, said, “My sense is that this is core Sojourn discipline... The methodology we used we’re practiced in as a company and we are pretty comfortable with it... My observation is that Sojourn has a strong discipline of gathering multiple voices. It would be easy for us to make our work from our specific viewpoints as individuals and as a collective. I think [that] is less interesting to members of the company than it is to represent a full a spectrum of voices as possible.”

Specifically talking about this incident in Lima and how it brought up race relations again, Eiland recalls, “We want to hear the voices that say, ‘No, everything is fine’ or ‘Yeah, there are some problems.’ Words we use a lot are ‘Let’s not be afraid to share something that might be ugly or might be hard to listen to.’ There has been a real interest in not shying away from things that might make us or other people in the community uncomfortable as well as everything else.”

While Sojourn artists interviewed students, Lennsen met with school administrators and civic leaders and offered counsel and orientation to the arts-based dialogue. He explained what Sojourn looked for in interviews and what might appear once the pieces were created. The teachers were concerned that students would be offended, confidentiality of the students might be threatened, or student perceptions might damage the reputation of the school. Lennsen replied, “It’s okay to present student perceptions even though they might not be fact. The perception is not what all students think. Conflict is always going to have discomfort. I asked them: ‘How uncomfortable are you willing to be to enable productive conversations and healing?’ Conversations about race and racism involve courage, honesty, and issues of trust. These are courageous conversations. They were willing to be uncomfortable.”

After Sojourn completed its work, Rohd reflected, “I was very happy with the monologues because they got authentically at different voices in the community. (See the sidebar *Can’t Change* and Appendix D for monologues.) I was proud of the work that the company members and students did. I thought they got at some interesting ideas and perspectives. The hardest part for me was I was unable to be at the dialogues. [McClellan] would call during breaks and give updates. I understood it was fantastic.”

### **Common Threads’ Dialogue Process**

#### ***Involving the African American community***

Common Threads leaders agreed to proceed with the dialogue only if African American leaders supported the project. MacDonell made the first step to assure this support when she spoke with Brenda Ellis, a leader in the local chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, a national black women’s sorority. Ellis, director of special education at the Lima City Schools, agreed to serve on the planning committee. Then MacDonell approached Daniel Hughes. “I asked him if he could make a list of prospects for dialogue facilitators, and he said that he would start with the Black Ministerial Alliance members and then recruit other members of the community,” said MacDonell.



Hughes was a major presence in informing and recruiting members of the black community to participate in the project. “I worked with black ministers trying to get them onboard,” he recalls. “Trying to encourage people to do this for the youth, the city schools. I was also in conversation with white ministers. Everyone, both black and white, had some initial hesitation. At the time, everything was so racially charged. People were really upset.”

“Everyone wanted to *do* something. The Common Threads model gave us *something* to do. It gave us *movement*. When I referred to Common Threads’ first piece in 2002,<sup>3</sup> people kind of remembered

<sup>3</sup> The Allen County Common Threads Theater Project—Common Threads’ poetic drama and dialogue project—was a joint project with the Council for the Arts of Greater Lima, Bluffton College, and a steering committee of interested citizens. It engaged a large cross section

## **Lima Senior High Monologue**

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### **Can't Change**

Lima is the type of city you grow up in  
and then you move someplace else.

There's a lot of people who are helpful.

It ain't that bad a city as people make it-  
people say they aint nothing here  
but you can grow up and get an education  
without too many distractions.

You can know just about everybody.

You can't change what people really think, though...

Most people have a set—like, ok, like some children are raised in a rural area where there ain't  
no body around  
and they grow up and get married  
and only thing they know about the races  
is what they parents told them when they was younger  
and some they parents didn't like those races,  
so that image is imbedded in they head for the rest of they life and that's just...

That's just what they know.

Even I have things that my parents told me,  
and no matter what I do they're in the back of my mind

As far as tryin to educate people,  
that's a big burden just to put on somebody else,  
like a teacher.

They parents should have explained to them that not all people are just horrible if they ain't  
like you.

But I don' know, I don't know how we can do that...  
people just aint gonna do that.

If people can't talk in the hallway,  
then I don't know how they gonna talk in a classroom-  
if we tried to it would probly carry out of the class and wouldn't be able to stop-  
somebody would take it to the next level .

I don't know, I don't know if that's worth it.

that...I don't think that they thought it was this sort of soft, glossy kind of thing...Wasn't negative, I guess. Maybe it wasn't positive, but it definitely wasn't negative. So just in referring to it was a good thing. That was kind of real."

The strong support for the student dialogue from Hughes and Emmanuel Curtis, operations facilitator with the Allen County Juvenile Court, originates in part from their prior working relationship with McClellan. All three had worked together in Positive Lifestyles, a student mentoring and career program in Lima City Schools. Also, Hughes and McClellan had started a book study with African American males a year before. They kept in close touch and had a history of working together to foster relationships between the school and the community.

"We talked a lot about what kids needed in the community and how to provide it for them," described McClellan. "It's hard for me to take this dialogue project and separate it from the support I got from them all the time. [Hughes and Curtis] helped recruit quite a few facilitators and both facilitated, too. I talked to both of them a lot."

#### **Recruiting facilitators**

While Hughes and McClellan explained the project to the community, the dialogue team coordinators, Judy Gilbert and David Adams, worked at details. (See the sidebar *Doing the Math*.) E-mails, cell phone calls, and text messages constantly flew between team members establishing specific dates and times for dialogue sessions, getting addresses and contact numbers for potential facilitators or groups of facilitators, identifying facilitators, and designing and scheduling facilitator training. Identifying approximately 100 volunteer dialogue facilitators who would commit to one or more of the four full days of dialogue scheduled at Lima Senior High turned out to be a daunting task. Since Common Threads had not done any large-scale dialogue projects for several years, the trained Common Threads facilitators had gone their separate ways, and only eight original facilitators could commit to this project.

After unsuccessful attempts to recruit individuals, the team tried recruiting groups, such as service clubs and other civic organizations. That did not work either. "Finally, we got the idea to contact the four area colleges and universities and ask each of them to provide volunteer facilitators one day as a service-learning program for their students. Three of the four colleges committed," MacDonell recalls. That covered three of the four days of dialogue. The Black Ministerial Alliance became a major player in the project and had representatives at each dialogue session, with community members helping to cover the fourth day.

#### **Doing the Math**

- 1,200 students
- 300 students each day for four days
- 3 sessions each day for four days
- 100 students per session
- 20 facilitators per session
- 20 tables per session, each with 5 students and 1 facilitator
- 5-10 extra facilitators each day to cover attrition/schedule issues
- Total facilitators needed = 60-80**

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of city and county residents, as well as leaders in dialogue, about issues of "trust among leaders" and "respecting differences." Over 14 months, the Sojourn Theatre Company met and interviewed 300 residents. Their words and perspectives fueled the "poetic documentary" play, *Passing Glances: Mirrors and Windows in Allen County*, which then became a focal point for dialogue at a community conference and commitments to action.

“As the dates of the dialogues sessions approached, a few volunteers worked day and night coordinating schedules and urging a diverse group of people to be trained and managing 100 volunteer facilitators from Bluffton and Ohio Northern Universities, Rhodes State College, the Black Ministerial Alliance, and other Lima residents,” MacDonell shared.

### ***Training facilitators***

Volunteers agreed to training if it was short. In response, the dialogue team created a two-hour facilitator-training program, and Gilbert tirelessly presented it to six different groups of facilitators in six different venues and time slots. She trained each university group at its school to make attendance easier. A total of 76 people attended these sessions.

Facilitator training included an outline of the program to date, definitions and discussion of dialogue, a description of the Common Threads dialogue circle/talking stone process, a showing of the monologue DVD, one round of dialogue, and the dialogue schedule at Lima Senior High.

The lead person at each school agreed to train those who could not attend as best they could with the materials provided by Common Threads. Bluffton University student Erin Ostling, who was unable to attend the training, remembers, “The material given out at the training I received the morning of the dialogue. I had it before I got there and read it. It was very similar to the circle dialogues that we’ve been trained to do. I felt comfortable with it and had a lot of training on campus and the way the process was set up.”

Facilitators felt the training was beneficial. “It was my first time doing the Common Threads [dialogue process],” said Curtis. “The personnel did a good job at communicating what they wanted to see. They made an effort to diversify the facilitators, which was really important. They did the best they could, especially using college students. I would like to see more training done with college students.”

Many people who were interviewed noted the strong diversity of the facilitators. Hughes was pleased with the response from the Black Ministerial Alliance but wanted more. “Of course, I wanted more people there. I wanted them to clear their schedules and be there the whole day. The ministers were such a huge part of what was going on at the time. It was wonderful Common Threads wanted us.”

### ***Finding funding***

As the dialogue team began its work, MacDonell drafted a budget showing \$7,000 in expenses. Expenses were low because Sojourn personnel waived their fees and the Common Threads personnel and all facilitators were volunteers. “When Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, co-directors of Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, learned about the crisis in Lima they were concerned,” noted MacDonell. “They knew Lima well and had funded the previous Common Threads project with Sojourn. They informed Robert Lynch, president and CEO of Americans for the Arts, of the crisis. He responded immediately by authorizing a modest financial contribution out of a discretionary fund to challenge local donors.”

MacDonell approached the local Procter and Gamble plant manager, Todd Hoffman, who helped her to apply to the P&G Foundation. P&G matched the Americans for the Arts contribution. Meanwhile, when Jacque Daley Perrin heard about the project, she and other members of the Daley family

offered a grant from Shirley J. Daley Community Fund, their mother's memorial fund. Perrin, like her mother, is a community leader and has been a volunteer dialogue facilitator and a member of the Common Threads steering committee since its very beginning.

### ***Designing the dialogue***

The development of the dialogue process for this project was as deliberate as the development of the artistic process. Common Threads personnel proposed to school representatives a small circle model that employs a facilitator for each table of five people. Each member of the circle in turn holds a talking stone while he or she speaks for a short allotted period of time. Common Threads' prior experience indicated that additional people at the table decrease the effectiveness of the dialogue so they were firm on this issue. Common Threads also requested that students be randomly selected for their tables in order to increase the variety of feelings and responses experienced.

Another important facet of Common Threads dialogue is a set of voluntary guidelines for participants. (See the *Dialogue Agreements* sidebar.) It provides a code of conduct and gives everyone at the table an equal opportunity to be heard. It is also a tool to which the facilitator can refer to keep the dialogue flowing. This can be particularly helpful when there are a number of inexperienced facilitators, as there were in this project.

“[Common Threads] always wants to present an environment where all participants have the opportunity to respond to the questions and the time to listen to and think about the responses of others. Ideally, the intimacy and to some extent the anonymity of the participants in the small group make people feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves openly. We know from experience that this Common Threads format produces effective dialogue.”

—Judy Gilbert

The Sojourn monologues were designed to serve as prompts for the students to see their own and others' experiences and feelings. Gilbert and her dialogue partner David Adams created ten questions based on the monologues. After a few iterations, they selected three questions and forwarded them to other members of the planning team for their input and approval. Two of the questions related directly to the monologues that the students would have just seen; one was an action question.

“Common Threads prefers to develop open-ended questions [that] are simply stated but have the

#### **Dialogue Agreements**

1. We will speak for ourselves and from our own experience.
2. We will not criticize the views of other participants nor will we attempt to persuade them to our point of view.
3. We will listen with resilience, “hanging in” when what is said is hard to hear.
4. We will participate within the timeframes suggested by facilitators.
5. We will not interrupt, except to indicate that we cannot hear a speaker.
6. We will “pass” if we do not wish to speak.
7. We will listen from a perspective of wonder, trying as much as possible to see things from the other person's point of view.

potential to elicit personal stories from dialogue participants,” explains Gilbert. “The objective of having people speak from their own experience is important because...no one else can tell this story and no one can criticize the person’s experience.”

Over time, Common Threads has learned that participants want to continue the experience. The dialogue frequently leads to proposed solutions to issues raised and a desire to act on them. Consequently, Common Threads usually ends each dialogue session with an “action” question—an opportunity for participants to state their interest in continuing the conversation, form an action group to address an issue, or just get involved in some way. The third question regarding what students at Lima Senior High could do to help the community was included to meet this “action” need (See the *Dialogue Questions* sidebar). McClellan was thrilled with this final question and the approximately 800 suggestions from students.

### Lima Senior High Preparation

While the Common Threads team worked on facilitation and dialogue content, McClellan took the lead on the project within Lima Senior High. Because the school is divided into three small high schools, he needed immediate planning and logistical assistance from the other two principals—Doug Kent, principal of the Performance Based School, and Judy Shisler, principal of the Progressive Academy. McClellan had two main goals: uncover what students were really thinking, and make everyone aware of the different perspectives that kids had within and beyond the school; and allow the students a structured way to talk with their peers about what they were feeling.

McClellan began by working with Kent and Shisler to provide Rohd with approximately 70 students to interview for the development of the monologues. “There were some extremely different voices in the schools,” noted McClellan, “and I wanted to make sure they were all heard. So I took the overall demographics of Lima Senior High, divided it by gender and race, and then chose a random sampling of names from my school. I gave the same mathematical categories to the other principals and invited them to select students from their schools.” The selected students had no prior orientation and were asked to interview with one of the Sojourn members. The artists answered their questions prior to their discussion.

Before the interviews, the school sent letters to the parents of the selected students explaining the project and noting that student participation was voluntary. “The parents had the opportunity to back out if they wanted,” McClellan said.

Teacher and student preparation was at each principal’s discretion, none of whom described any specific efforts. “From my end, there wasn’t a lot of time to prep students for what was going on because we had such a short turn around time,” Kent recalls.

#### Dialogue Questions

1. Tell us who you are and something you really like about Lima Senior High School.
2. Which speaker do you most identify with in the monologues you saw? What comment did he or she make that you most agree with?
3. Several of the monologues talk about issues of respect. Tell us about a recent experience here or anywhere when someone really treated you with respect.
4. What one thing can we do here at Lima Senior High that will help our community? (Answers to this question were recorded and turned in to the school administration.)

Norma Penn, a teacher in the Performance Based School, shared with her students an overview of the activities. “You’ll watch a video in the auditorium based on the interviews, then be divided into groups and discuss with a leader what you had seen and heard. You are free to respond however you wish or not respond at all. You are not being forced to participate.” I explained we wanted an outlet for their opinions and emotions.” Harmony Brenneman, a teacher from the School of Multiple Intelligence, recalled a memo from McClellan explaining the project, and “I understood this was led by community members, and we should sit back and take in what they were doing.”

Finally, over the four dialogue days, each small school rearranged its class schedules to accommodate the dialogue sessions. Much to McClellan’s surprise he observed, “Those [dialogue days] were some of the smoothest days. I don’t remember a problem with any students. They were being heard and signing up to become more involved.”

## DIALOGUE SESSIONS

On February 21, and the three subsequent school days, approximately 100 students assembled at 8:30 a.m. in the auditorium to watch the 15-minute Sojourn monologues on a large screen. This group was the first of three one-hour sessions that day. After watching the monologues, students walked to the cafeteria and were divided into 20 groups of five students, each group having one facilitator. In order to randomly assign students to tables, each student received a numbered card that corresponded to a table as he or she left the auditorium. Issues with tables assignments—‘lost,’ traded, or ignored cards; and the normal fluctuation of school attendance—were quickly resolved.

Once the students were settled, the dialogue process began. One of the school principals introduced each session by speaking about Common Threads and explaining that it had been invited to Lima Senior High. Then one of the Common Threads leaders (either Gilbert or Adams) oriented the students to the process, and students began three rounds of dialogue. (See the *Common Threads and Its Dialogue Process* sidebar.)



### Listening In

So what did students talk about? How did they react to the monologues and opinions of their fellow students? How well did the discussions go? These questions were posed to students, educators, administrators, and facilitators six months after

## **Common Threads and Its Dialogue Process**

### **Mission Statement**

Common Threads programs bring together people with different perspectives from all sectors of the Allen County community. Using a form of art or other medium as a catalyst, participants engage in civic dialogue on issues of mutual concern.

### **Conversations on Questions That Matter**

The Common Threads dialogue process is a circle dialogue comprised of five to eight participants plus one facilitator. At the beginning of a session, a moderator introduces and describes the process to the group and reads the protocol or agreements that will guide the dialogue. (See Sidebar on Dialogue Agreements.) Participants are asked to agree that the protocol will guide their conversations.

People in the circle are asked to respond to a question one at a time. They each have a maximum of two minutes to state their response. They may pass if they do not care to respond and will be asked later if they would like to contribute. Common Threads uses a “talking stone”, which a speaker holds as he or she responds. The speaker passes the stone to the person to the left. A person only speaks when he or she has the stone. All other participants are asked to focus on listening to the speaker.

Common Threads dialogues usually focus on an introductory round followed by three to five questions per session. In the Lima Senior High dialogues, students first introduced themselves. In the following three rounds, each responded to two questions using the monologues as prompts and then a third action question related to the issues under discussion. Each session lasted 55 minutes. Each table had about 12 minutes per question, and facilitators requested students to limit their comments to two minutes.

Because of the variety of experience of the facilitators for this project and the timing constraints of the Lima Senior High schedule, all the tables were asked to address the same question at the same time. Sessions were timed and the moderator let people know when everyone was ready to move on to the next question.

the project. They gave a rich and varied set of personal reactions and observations of the discussions. (See Appendix B for an extended list of direct quotes.)

So what was the reaction to the monologues? Students said that it was “interesting to hear all the points of view at Lima Senior,” that “they helped me grasp the concept of different opinions,” and that watching the performances were both “weird” and “cool.” Most recognized the monologue story lines within themselves or from other students. A few administrators did not recognize some of the student-described experiences and felt they were misleading. They especially objected to the portrayal of the police.

Many agreed the monologues prompted discussion. One student said, “Without the video, we would have had nothing to talk about. We would have sat there wondering what were we supposed to do. By watching the videos first, we were able to react.” Another student observed, “A lot of us referenced the monologues as we spoke about what we actually felt and we compared ourselves to what was said in the monologues. I don’t know if we would have talked as much if the monologues weren’t there to use. The experience was pretty cool. I totally had my doubts when it started.”

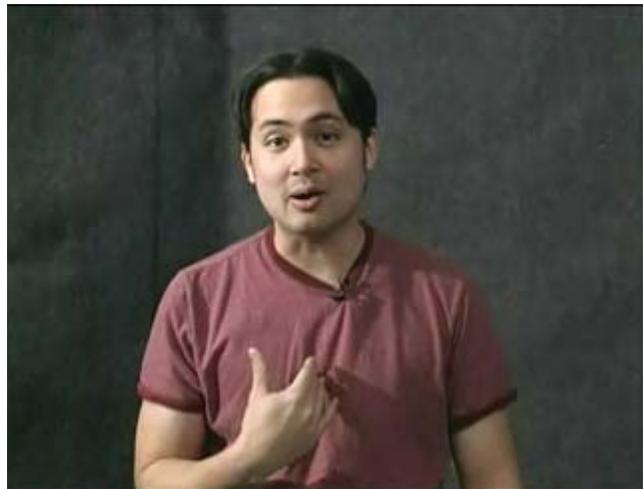
Many students expressed doubts, especially because they were unfamiliar with small group dialogue, but they were curious and willing to give it a try. Students and facilitators commented that initially

students were “reserved” and “worried” and not willing to share their full opinion because they were “unsure how others would react.” But once students understood the process and saw evidence that everyone was adhering to the dialogue agreements, students started to open up. One student said, “I was expecting people to judge how I felt was wrong. No one said, ‘You are stupid. You can’t feel that way because I don’t.’ Everyone was listening to each other’s opinions. It was really nice.”

David Harris, senior pastor of the Trinity United Methodist Church and volunteer facilitator, succinctly summed up other facilitators’ comments, “The students were all over the place as far as their responses, how well they were connected to the process, what their feeling levels were, and how their trust level may have been.”

Regarding the actual topics of conversation, students spoke about their personal experiences and observations of stereotyping in their family, in school, with police, with teachers, and the larger community stereotypes of Lima Senior High being a ‘bad place.’ Emmanuel Curtis recalled, “They felt a sense of weakness when it came down to seeing other students mistreated and not knowing how to help out. I heard this from *all* groups.” Virgil Mann noticed in all five of his groups, “Literally every African American student had a story to tell about the Lima police...about being stopped, questioned, or frisked. I was surprised that every kid had that experience.”

Other topics included students’ desire for more parental involvement, certainly the range of opinions about the Wilson shooting, the recognition that Lima Senior High felt calm and different from the city’s tensions, the desire to become more active in the Lima community to dispel the negative image of Lima Senior High, and the interest in making their own school a more respectful community. Action ideas included more interaction with younger students, more black teachers, more community service projects, and more dialogue opportunities.



### **Student Evaluation**

At the conclusion of the dialogue session, one of the principals invited students to evaluate the process by responding to the questions, “What was good about the process/experience?” and “What can be improved?” Students wrote their comments on sticky notes and attached them to big sheets of paper hanging on the cafeteria walls.

#### ***What was good about the experience?***

Students identified three major aspects of the process that were good: the opportunity to express their opinions, the new awareness of other points of view, and the respectfulness that occurred during the dialogue.

*“I have a voice and someone is interested in my opinion.”*

Everyone involved noticed students liked having the opportunity to express their opinions and feelings. In fact, approximately 60 students wrote some version of that statement. As each session began, it felt unfamiliar and “weird” for students, yet when they heard the opinions of their peers in the monologues and around the table it was “cool.” “I like the fact that we finally had a chance to speak our minds,” wrote one student. “I like that they gave us an opportunity to voice our opinions and hear others,” stated another.

*“It gave everybody insight on what others think.”*

Students found Sojourn’s effort to present a variety of student views and the subsequent discussions quite meaningful. Approximately 70 share this general sentiment. One note said, “I took away a better understanding of everyone. I thought it was interesting that my peers were having the same thoughts I was having. I didn’t know that.” Another student wrote, “I had a broader understanding of what all the different groups of people think. It wasn’t limited to my friends so I got a better idea of what was going on here and I was able to relate to them, to know what they were going through.”

*“I liked that we had a code of respect.”*

Students also appreciated aspects of the dialogue process—random seating, the facilitators, the agreements, small groups, conversation instead of lectures, the listening, talking about a specific subject, equal treatment, and the monologues featuring voices to which they could relate.

*“Good questions. Random tables equal better results.”*

*“I like how they had voices that we could relate to. People speaking for us.”*

*“I had a really good facilitator. She made us open up more instead of holding what we had to say in.”*

“The positive thing about this was that I got to speak my feelings and no one would try to switch my words up.”

*“Having someone talking with a small group of us instead of lecturing was good.”*

#### **What can be improved?**

The leading suggestion was to give more time to talk. Some disliked the two-minute speaking limitation, but most seemed to want more time to listen to their peers. “I think that the time could have been longer because there was some good ideas that could not be expressed because of a lack of time,” wrote one student. “I didn’t like how our responses to the questions were timed. I feel that I didn’t get to voice myself the way I wanted to,” another note stated.

Student reaction to the monologues was very diverse. Several students shared their impressions that they felt “kinda fake,” while others generally disliked them. Some commented on the production of the monologues: one student thought Sojourn should have interviewed more students, while another wanted more of a choice of monologues.

## LIMA SENIOR'S NEXT STEPS

Because each dialogue session ended with an action question, many felt that the administration would review the responses and begin in some way to act. McClellan describes, "One of our prompts was, 'Are you willing to get more engaged? Are you willing to do more?' In response, an overwhelming number of kids from all three schools wanted to become more involved. However, no additional actions were organized around student interest or suggestions that school year. Administrators and school personnel intended to do follow-up programs, but due to personnel changes they were not able to implement these programs until the following year.

In the follow-up interviews, people noted that the initial project goal was dialogue in the moment of a community crisis. Most recognized that because the whole effort from start to finish occurred in 21 days, the planning team had no time to develop a phase-two action project. Some reflected that a phase-two action project should now be developed.

"Students saw value in being given the chance to express themselves about the school, town, teachers, and what we can do better. The value diminishes if we don't do anything."

—Virgil Mann

Superintendent Oxley recognized this point and has been working with Windle and Mann to develop the next phase of the project. "We always recognized this was not a one-time event. It has to be that we are able to follow-up and continue the work. For instance, if students feel there are biases in the school system, we want to continue those kinds of conversations and move it forward and not be defensive." Overall, she felt the project "drove us into deeper reflection about what we need to do to improve our work with students."

The three principals have since received a summary of the student action ideas and were invited to address them in any manner that aligns with their school objectives.

As of December 2008, several projects, including many that are arts-based, are underway.

A newly formed student ambassador group created to change the image of Lima Senior High now joins Oxley when she gives speeches in the community.

The school's annual moon buggy project, which involves building a vehicle that will operate on the moon, has been expanded. The project team now presents to community groups and invites community input, thereby forming relationships between the school and the community.

Lima City Schools will use the Common Threads dialogue process to address bullying. Middle school students will present a skit to elementary students and then will lead small group dialogue among them. This project focuses on empathic and improved listening skills.

Common Threads leaders reflected on the amount of time it can take for follow-up work to take hold after dialogues. Following the 2002 Sojourn project, they recalled an incubation period ranging from six months to six years during which time action projects were formulated and implemented. (Projects included monthly public officials luncheons, focused on encouraging dialogue, and Allen County 2020, a grassroots citizen initiative for planning the future of the Allen County community.)

The range of projects developed in Lima City Schools over the two years following the prompting tragedy suggests a significant impact of the Common Threads/Sojourn collaborations.

## REFLECTIONS AND LEARNING

What made this project succeed? What elements were present that made it possible for Lima Senior High students to participate in open and meaningful dialogue about this tragic incident in their community? What were the challenges and lessons learned?

### Critical Success Factors

#### *A systems approach*

In thinking back on what made the dialogue days work well, people interviewed described the importance of the multiple facets of the project, how they all came together in the dialogue sessions, and how each one supported the other.

John Lenssen described the factors in this way: “The Sojourn process (interviews, student voices, creative process, facilitation); [MacDonell’s] role in connecting the community as well as her prior community arts work; the strong role of [McClellan], with his honesty, advocacy of equity, and his capacity to manage the nuts and bolts; [Hughes] mobilizing his connections and relationships; the mobilization of the facilitators in general and [Gilbert’s] training of the facilitators; and the parallel things happening in the school besides the Common Threads work, like the Jesse Jackson visit.”

Gilbert summarized, “This was a very organic process, hectic but natural and flowing. The planning team had an automatic understanding of cause and effect and acted accordingly. It’s really a great example of systems thinking. Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* describes it as ‘peripheral vision: the ability to pay attention to the world as if through a wide-angle, not a telephoto lens, so you can see how your actions interrelate with other areas of activity.’ That’s how this group instinctively worked together. They knew each part was critical to the success of the whole.”

#### *A legacy of community arts and dialogue*

One oft-cited success factor was the existing familiarity and comfort that residents have with art as a way to shine a light on community issues.

For the last four decades, propelled by Martie MacDonell’s passion and vision, thousands of Allen County residents have been exposed to and involved in arts-in-education programs and other arts projects promoting downtown design and arts infrastructure. Since 1999, Common Threads has worked with the community to address important issues through facilitated and arts-based civic dialogue. (See Appendix C for more information.) Lima City Schools students and faculty have, in fact, worked with Sojourn and used arts-based civic dialogue in several district-wide projects since 2002.

Because of this groundwork, arts-based civic dialogue was part of the culture and a tool for civic

discourse and problem-solving in the Lima/Allen County community. For Lima Senior High officials, it was a working model that could quickly help students express themselves regarding the shooting incident in January 2008.

### ***Strong prior professional relationships***

The three partners—Sojourn Theatre Company, Lima City Schools, and Common Threads—have worked together on a variety of projects since 2001. A fast-paced production schedule was possible because each partner had its own well-defined area of expertise, knew and respected the others' expertise, and knew how to work together in a coordinated but independent way.

“The speed with which everyone put this together and followed through on it was tremendous. I don't know a lot of places where that could happen and be that organized. Because there is an infrastructure and a group of people committed to this work, they were able to do this.”

—Michael Rohd

### ***Students' openness to dialogue***

A real key was that students were open to watching the monologues and participating in the dialogue. They were given the opportunity to opt out of the sessions but few did. Windle observed that “the kids were open” to the project. School leaders had recognized the need and selected an appropriate activity. Students knew too that they wanted to talk about the issues and welcomed the chance to do so.

### ***Alignment of purpose***

Everyone who produced the dialogue sessions was genuinely concerned for Lima and its youth. Literally all involved—Common Threads, Sojourn, facilitators, school personnel, and project leaders—dropped their normal routines to help. Sojourn members, facilitators and project leaders donated their time. This commitment led to an immediate alignment of purpose, enabling the partners to hit the ground running and achieve success despite the complexity and fast-pace of this production.

“It was one of the things I've done in the last batch of years that I'm absolutely most proud of, by far. I don't mean to say I think it accomplished everything...I mean, we got a call from a community that we had a relationship with as artists. We were asked by our friends to be helpful in a moment of crisis—to the best of our abilities, to offer aid. We offered aid by listening, making art, and helping to develop structures for spaces where people could come together and have difficult conversations. We accomplished that in a relatively successful way. I'm really glad to have had the experience and proud of the people that I worked with. They did really good public work.”

—Michael Rohd

### **Challenges**

All projects present challenges, but the team working on this project dealt with two formidable issues: How to develop an arts-based response to a community crisis; and how to accomplish all the necessary details in a very short period of time. Both provided learning experiences.

**Art as a response to crisis**

Although the planning team had worked together before in creating programs involving art as a catalyst for civic dialogue, they had not done so in response to a community crisis. Previous Common Threads programs addressed issues of race, trust, and respect—the very issues besetting Lima following the tragic shooting. Would those earlier prototypes work in the current charged environment? The team trusted their theater and dialogue models, but they also realized they needed to be more cognizant of emotions and more sensitive to the climate in the community. The work had to be timely, caring, and able to provide students with a meaningful dialogue experience.

As Sojourn and Common Threads prepared, they kept these criteria in mind along with the usual artistic and logistic responsibilities. They also knew they had to create monologues and dialogues to *really* draw in students, set up dialogue circles where students felt comfortable enough to share their feelings, and garner support from faculty and staff so students willingly participated.

The team knew some quality might suffer as a result of the pressure to respond quickly. But they were also reminded of what organizational management guru Meg Wheatley said, “It doesn’t need to be perfect. It just has to work.” Responding to a crisis inherently involves a volatile environment where what comes next is uncertain. Participants must rely on past experience and familiar models. The dialogue team managed this project “in the moment” with little time to be mindful of the related challenges that could later arise.

“In a crisis, there is no time to disagree and second-guess the other players. You have to do what needs to be done as soon and efficaciously as possible. The people in this project worked well in this way.”

—Judy Gilbert

**Fast pace**

The team’s greatest challenge was lack of time.

McClellan stated in the first organizing meeting that the dialogues needed to be completed in one month. “We had a situation that needed to be addressed immediately with the students,” Lensen felt that moving promptly introduced the students to a way of talking about difficult issues—a courageous conversation.

Not everyone agreed with the timeframe. Doug Kent, principal of the Performance Based School, said, “When you go into these things with the magnitude of what was going on in the community, you need to make sure to involve more students and put more thought in the front end.”

**Quality of facilitation**

Gilbert knew she could only offer two-hour sessions to train facilitators. In normal circumstances, she would have provided more opportunity for role playing and practicing group facilitation.

Given the limited training, facilitation was uneven. Some college age facilitators “didn’t seem nearly

equipped to lead the dialogues,” as Harris remarked. “Some were a little unnerved by the process, perhaps because of their lack of life experience. In hindsight, we could have had a few more students per table and reduced the number of facilitators,” Mann noted.

### ***Teacher participation***

The short time frame also minimized teacher and parent involvement in planning and follow-up. McClellan felt teachers were professionals and able to handle these things. “It would have been great if we could have engaged them more up front, but that was sacrificed in the process,” he explained.

“The students really wanted this to be a student-only process,” Rohd recalls. “I wanted to talk to the whole faculty and share what we were doing and how we were doing it, but I was told we had no time.”

### ***Timely follow-up on student suggestions***

Finally, many mentioned their desire to respond to student-suggested action items in a timely manner, even though everyone acknowledged that this went beyond the goal of the immediate project of producing student dialogues. Hughes realized in hindsight, “We needed a bigger team or maybe two—one group that spearheaded it and a second that did the follow-up work. It takes a lot of energy to do both.”

### **How Art Makes a Difference**

Common Threads brings together people with different perspectives for conversations on issues of mutual concern, using an art form or other medium as a catalyst. In the case of the Lima Senior High dialogues, the art of theater became the prompt.

Students viewed a video of Sojourn actors performing monologues created from fellow students’ responses to the fatal shooting of Tarika Wilson. They heard opinions that represented their own views and other ideas and experiences that were very different and sometimes hard to hear. However, it was easier to hear these opinions performed by anonymous actors up on a large screen than experience face-to-face exchanges. Art was the go-between for students to process the reality of their lives in a safe, neutral, and non-threatening environment. “It would have been terrifying if Lima Senior students performed the monologues,” Rohd said. “The students watching would have been associating their impressions with the student performers. This way, they had to really concentrate on the words and the stories because of the anonymity. I think absolutely that made a huge difference in this project.”

“There’s just something about art...It’s open to interpretation. It’s open to community. You can share it with others, and you can have your own sort of personal experience. Art takes us out of the mundane, out of the ordinary. You have to have the artistic piece. It does something that ordinary conversations cannot do.”

—Daniel Hughes

## Evolving a Culture of Arts and Civic Engagement

Civic leaders in Lima and Allen County have now used the Common Threads approach to civic participation in neighborhood planning, for good conversations among public officials at regular luncheons, for grassroots citizen-based visioning for the community's future, for understanding change in the Lima City Schools, and for conferences of social workers.

“In producing arts-based dialogue over the years, we have intentionally worked with outside artists with specialized training and skills in dialogic practice, a skill-set not previously available in Lima,” MacDonell said. “We have learned from experience that this work is most effective when it is facilitated by artists who are not associated with local issues. This practice has been validated by earlier participants in arts-based civic dialogue and by student feedback from the recent student dialogue project. And now we have tried this tool in an arts intervention for a community crisis.”

Michael Huffman, former director of arts and magnet programs at the Lima City Schools, remembers his first experience with Rohd's artistry. “His work is profound, subtle, anonymous, yet it's intimate... It's thinking about everyday conversations—what's on your mind. Normally we take in social-political [topics] in a passive way. When you attach arts it becomes active. Since my work with [Rohd], I use it constantly with my students, and I have changed the way I do my own visual arts work. Since 2002, we have completed two district-wide projects—the “shelter” project and the “shrines to lost schools” project—as well as used dialogue to plan the small school design in the new high school.”

As arts-based civic dialogue begins to appear in the Lima City Schools curriculum as a tool for learning, local student artists under the supervision of Sojourn-trained arts specialists are making art that catalyzes civic dialogue. Issues addressed have included: the many meanings of the term “shelter” in Lima's civic vocabulary; and the need to memorialize important community landmarks, like the twelve “lost” schools that were recently replaced in the city. As this trend continues, possibly a few of these students will grow into local professional artists who will advance this civic practice in Lima.

“Before Lima's experience with Animating Democracy's laboratory for arts-based dialogue in 2001,<sup>4</sup> we practiced a homegrown version of arts for social change, inviting diverse outside professional artists of all ethnicities,” MacDonell reflects. “Since the community's learning experience with Sojourn Theatre, afforded by Americans for the Arts and Animating Democracy, we were able to practice a protocol that provides the opportunity for deep and sometimes courageous conversations prompted by art. Student dialogues at Lima Senior High School gave teenagers a way to process a violent incident in our city. Common Threads leaders believe that arts-based civic dialogue could become an accepted practice to address important community issues so that all participant voices are heard. It will no longer be extraordinary when a story, a play, a painting, a historical fact prompts deep conversation on questions that matter in the Lima/Allen County community.”

<sup>4</sup> This interaction with Animating Democracy instigated the Sojourn/Common Threads 2002 project resulting in the play, *Passing Glances: Windows and Mirrors in Allen County*.

# AUTHORS

## **Judith E. Gilbert**

Judy Gilbert has more than 35 years experience in business and education, with particular expertise in issue management and professional communications. She has served as director of public and community affairs at BP Oil/BP Chemicals (Lima, Ohio), special assistant to the president of Bluffton University, and English, journalism, and business educator in area educational institutions. Gilbert currently provides consulting services in strategic planning, project management, meeting facilitation, and community, public, and media relations to nonprofit organizations. She introduced Allen County Common Threads, along with Martie MacDonell, in 2001.

## **Martha S. MacDonell**

Martie MacDonell works through the arts to foster education, diversity, and civic advancement in Lima, Ohio. She was a founding member of the Council for the Arts of Greater Lima, an award-winning community arts provider. Over several decades, she spearheaded visiting artist programs in local schools, leading to the development of an arts magnet school program. She co-founded and directed American House, a cultural organization producing public oral history programs to interpret the area's diverse ethnic cultures and industrial history. Along with Judy Gilbert, MacDonell now leads Allen County Common Threads, promoting facilitated small group civic dialogue as a tool for community change.

## **Mary F. Weis**

Mary Weis works with community organizations in program and organizational development efforts and in research and editorial projects. Her recent projects have involved Spontaneous Celebrations, a community arts organization in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston, the Boston Urban Forest Coalition, and Allen County Common Threads in Lima, Ohio. She helped launch, in an editorial role, the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, a national publication featuring emerging nonprofit management practices. Prior to this, Weis earned a masters degree in urban policy at Tufts University and coordinated programs at American House in Lima, Ohio.

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# APPENDIX A

## LIST OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED FOR THE CASE STUDY

### Artistic

Jono Eiland, member, Sojourn Theatre Company

Reggie Gowland, bachelor's degree in theatre arts, Northwestern University

John Lenssen, consultant and adjunct faculty member, College of Education, University of Oregon;  
board member, Sojourn Theatre Company

Michael Rohd, artistic director, Sojourn Theatre Company

Adam Welton, bachelor's degree in theatre arts, Northwestern University

### Lima City Schools

Harmony Brenneman, teacher, School of Multiple Intelligence

Michael Huffman, teacher, North Middle School

Doug Kent, principal, Performance Based School

Virgil Mann, retired teacher

Jeff McClellan, principal, School of Multiple Intelligence

Karel Oxley, superintendent

Norma Penn, teacher, Performance Based School

Judy Shisler, principal, Progressive Academy

Jennifer Stepleton, teacher, Progressive Academy

Sally Windle, director of arts and magnet programs

Five students of varying grade levels

### Facilitators

David S. Adams, associate professor emeritus, sociology, The Ohio State University at Lima; convener,  
Common Threads Public Officials Dialogue Project; 8th Ward councilor, Lima City Council

Laura Brenneman, assistant professor of religion, Bluffton University

Rachel Burns, director of youth ministries, Trinity United Methodist Church

Emmanuel Curtis, operations facilitator, Allen County Juvenile Court

David Harris, senior pastor, Trinity United Methodist Church

Daniel Hughes, assistant director, Allen Metropolitan Housing Authority; pastor, Future Church

Lyle Gilbert, CEO, New Vision Resources; chairman, Allen 2020 Visioning Project

George Latio, intern, Lima Allen Metropolitan Housing Authority

Erin Ostling, restorative justice liaison, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Bluffton University

Lewis Shine, director, Black Achievers Program, Lima Family YMCA

**Other**

David Berger, mayor, City of Lima

# APPENDIX B

## LISTENING IN

The experiences of those who participated in the dialogues are rich and varied, reflecting a diversity of culture, values, and lifestyles. This appendix offers a collection of responses received from the interviews with students, educators, administrators, and facilitators six months after the project. For those wanting to more directly understand the opinions and perspectives students shared with each other, please read on.

### Responses to the Monologues

These quotes provide a sense of how the performances prompted emotions and offer a window into some of what students were feeling as they entered the cafeteria to begin a dialogue with other students.

#### *Listening to students*

**Showed what people felt.** “At first I thought [the monologues] were kinda ridiculous, but then I remembered what exactly happened and thought they really showed what people thought and felt and ways we could maybe change it or something.”

**Cool and weird.** “I don’t know what I was expecting. But at first I thought, ‘This is weird.’ Then I started watching, getting into it, focusing, and I liked it. Some of my friends who had gone before me said it was weird, and they didn’t like it too much. I went in there thinking I’d not like it. But I liked it. I thought it was really cool.”

**Many points of view.** “It was cool. People could speak their minds. It was interesting to hear all the points of view about Lima Senior. There was a lot of them. I agreed with some and disagreed with others. But I thought it was cool everybody got to hear the voice of students.”

#### *Adults observed and reflected*

**Affirmation.** “I remember a student’s reaction when one of the actors actually verbalized what he had shared in his interview, ‘People have stereotypes about me because I live on this side of town. I’m a young African American and live on the south side of town.’ For him hearing that verbalized in a public way was extremely affirming.” (Jennifer Stepleton, teacher)

**Misleading.** “Very upset. Disgruntled. Not happy. Because there were a lot of misleading falsehoods in the monologue. For example, there was a clip in there reflecting upon students indicating police walked the halls with their guns out. That has never happened in this building.” (Doug Kent, principal)

**Realism vs. Perception.** “Comments [on] how students sit in the cafeteria didn’t feel realistic. In my lunch periods, students really mix so that comment took me aback a little bit. It might happen in other lunches I haven’t seen. The other comment about the police, it didn’t seem to be a fair comment, because I had not ever witnessed the students treated in the ways described within the school. But I’m sure that may be the perception of some. It’s not that it was right or wrong. It was based on the student’s perception.” (Judy Shisler, principal)

**Recognition.** “Every single one of the monologues I heard, students [say] the same thing to me. The way it was presented. It’s one thing to read it or hear it, but it’s another to have a face to say it in character. It was gut wrenching.” (Jeff McClellan, principal)

**Awareness.** “I was impressed with it. It was insightful and did a good job at presenting students’ feelings. Some of them I hadn’t been aware of. Most of it was pretty much what they felt because I had had prior discussions, randomly in the classroom or during down time. It kept my attention. [The monologues] were short enough to keep your attention, but long enough so that you knew what that person is feeling and their perception of what was going on.” (Harmony Brenneman, teacher)

**Depth.** “They were a true reflection of students’ feelings and experiences and not always in a way everyone wanted to hear. The depth of issues was presented in a way that drove deeper reflection about what we need to do to improve our work with students.” (Karel Oxley, superintendent)

**Not easy.** “A couple [of the monologues] are not the easiest to listen to when you think about the fact that they are coming from young kids and the things they are having to think about and deal with.” (Jono Eiland, actor)

**Non-threatening.** “The kids seemed to enjoy it. They were hearing it from a non-threatening person. The [Sojourn] actors instantly invited them in, so it felt comfortable, someone like them. There was such ease in the delivery that the kids had no trouble understanding it.” (Sally Windle, director of arts and magnet programs)

### Experience of Small Group Dialogue

This collection of quotes offers a sense of what a dialogue session felt like for students. Students and others describe their experiences of the give-and-take between one another and what actually happened with the students and the facilitators at their tables using the Common Threads dialogue design, the seven agreements, and the talking stone.

#### *Listening to students*

**Initial hesitation.** “It took a while for people to get comfortable with putting their opinions out there. At first I didn’t speak. I wasn’t sure how people would react to what I had to say. I didn’t want to start a big commotion, but once other people started talking, I felt more comfortable telling my opinion because they were going to be more mature about it. We heard everyone’s opinions.”

**Warming up.** “I was reserved. I thought, ‘I don’t really know if I want to share my stuff with people I don’t know really that well.’ After a couple of times going around, we started getting more into stuff. We started with easier questions so we kinda got warmed up. Then eventually people started opening up. I don’t think anybody fully opened up. I know I didn’t. I didn’t express all my opinions full out. I was more comfortable the farther we got into it.”

**Monologues were a prompt.** “A lot of us referenced the monologues as we spoke about what we actually felt, and we compared ourselves to what was said in the monologues. I don’t know if we would have talked as much if the monologues weren’t there to use. The experience was pretty cool. I totally had my doubts when it started. I thought, ‘This is going to be weird. I’m not going to say what I felt.’ But it wasn’t that big of a group, and the facilitator was really nice. We all sat there, and surprising

it was not judgmental. I was expecting people to judge me and how I felt, and I was wrong. Sure we had our little disagreements, like, 'I feel this way.' No one really said, 'You are stupid. You can't feel that way because I don't.' It was pretty open and everyone was listening with each other opinions. It was really nice."

**Worried.** "People weren't as open at the table because then it wasn't anonymous anymore. They were a little worried about what everyone else would think. I know that was not all they wanted to say. It's just, they were worried."

**Teachers took heed.** "By seeing the videos first you were able to react. Without the videos you would have nothing to talk about. Our table had a good reaction. I felt we had some nice conversation. I felt some teachers that were there took heed to what we were saying."

**Before and after.** "Before we had the dialogue, people argued about their opinions. After the session, more people were talking, but maybe not arguing about it. Now that we saw how it could be done in a mature fashion, it was more like that."

#### **Adults observed and reflected**

**Self-protection.** "They were protecting themselves pretty well. They were couching what they said." (Laura Brenneman, facilitator)

**Listening.** "I didn't anticipate how hard they would listen. Holding the stone, also gave them permission to listen. Students recognized their thoughts." (Sally Windle, director of arts and magnet programs)

#### **Wide range of student participation.**

"As I walked around, by body language, I would estimate about one-third were quite engaged, one-third were modestly engaged, and the other third were passing time." (David Adams, Common Threads)

"I thought most of the kids responded very well. There was only a few students kinda slouched in their seats not really wanting to participate." (Harmony Brenneman, teacher)

"Some students were very, very engaged. Others took it as something that was pulling them out of the classroom, and they did not necessarily want to do that." (Doug Kent, principal)

"At the start of some sessions, some students turned their chairs away from the table. Clear body language that they did not intend to participate. Yet as the dialogue went on, they began to gradually turn their chairs inward toward the dialogue, and many began to speak. I noticed this transformation. Those students found it hard to stay disengaged." (Common Threads facilitator)

#### **Opinions and Perspective Heard 'round the Table**

Finally, this listening circle shares the actual thoughts, feelings, and issues students discussed around the table.

**Listening to students**

**A range of opinions.** “A lot of people thought there was a lot of racism. The police were out of line. But I also heard a lot of ‘She took that chance of being in the situation she was in.’ I heard a lot of both sides.”

**Common value.** “A couple of days afterwards, I remember talking about which monologue we liked, which ones were funny, which ones we totally didn’t agree with. We even talked about what we said at our tables. We didn’t call anyone out—“this dude at my table said, ‘this.’ But we did talk about different people’s feelings and how our opinions differed from theirs. In the middle, we all had the same core values, pretty much. And how it was going to be okay. We were all there for the same reasons and none of us really wanted to fight.”

**Adults observed and reflected**

**Stereotypes.** “We talked a lot about stereotypes. The stereotype of a black male student or a black male in general is definitely recognized. If they get in a classroom or trouble in school, the other students of different gender or background all recognized it, but they never talked about it until [these dialogue days]. They definitely related. I had one young man who had moved into the district, and his parents had prepped him for going into this war zone. He has some great friends. They are black and white. That is a discussion he would not have had over the lunch table. It allowed him to open up, to share that, to get that off his chest. I think it brought comfort to the group.” (Emmanuel Curtis, facilitator)

**Sense of weakness.** “They all liked each other. They were nothing but positive in their reaction to other students. They felt a sense of weakness when it came down to seeing other students mistreated and not knowing how to help out. They recognized students being judged, but did not know what they could do to bring awareness to certain issues. I heard that from *all* groups.” (Emmanuel Curtis, facilitator)

**Difficult daily life.** “These kids go through a lot of stuff. It makes it hard for them to learn sometimes. The least of their worries is coming to school and doing their work when some of the things they talked about go on, like fearing for your life walking home. The way they are treated in school, I guess they [some school personnel] don’t take into account what the kids really go through. Sometimes people run over that.” (Louis Shine, facilitator)

**Parental involvement.** “Students wanted their parents to be involved. One made a comment, ‘They are at Lima Senior so they don’t really matter. They’re at the bottom of the totem pole in Allen County. If their parents cared, they would send you somewhere else. Over there people care about what the kids have to say.’ That really got to me.” (Erin Ostling, facilitator)

**School felt different.** “They had a lot to say about the shooting, the tension, and the marches in town. I heard, ‘We know this is going on in the streets, but it’s not in our high school. People need to know.’ They didn’t feel the racial tension in the high school.” (Virgil Mann, facilitator)

**Dialogue in the classroom.** “Quite a few said, ‘we should be doing this in our classrooms.’ In many instances, they don’t have the opportunity to express their opinions in classes, and not necessary just about race.” (Virgil Mann, facilitator)

**Lima Senior stereotypes.** “The kids said over and over, ‘We need to get more involved in the community by volunteering. We want to show them we are not criminals. Lima Senior is not a bad place.’ They want to show the community they are good kids.” (Virgil Mann, facilitator)

# APPENDIX C

## **A Legacy of Community Arts and Multicultural Programs in Lima AND Allen County, Ohio, 1966–2008**

Arts and cultural organizations and other civic groups have a long history of addressing civic issues affecting community development in Lima and Allen County, Ohio. Issues addressed over the last 40 years have expanded from artists in residence in the schools to community-wide projects addressing challenging civic issues, such as race and civic leadership and urban revitalization. Without what came before, Common Threads could not have gone forward to successfully produce the dialogue sessions at Lima Senior High School in the face of a crisis in the community.

### **1966**

- Council for the Arts of Greater Lima (CFA) institutes visiting artists in the schools programs.

### **1970s**

- CFA pilot theater programs for all ages and residents of Allen County are launched in a renovated theater located in a deteriorating neighborhood.
- An effort to develop a performance hall and conference center in Lima's Town Square begins and is built ten years later.

### **1980s**

- Lima City Schools establishes an arts magnet school to address de facto segregation in the local schools.
- American House, Inc. is established to further the role of arts and culture in community development. It begins an oral history collection and cultural programs exploring Allen County's industrial work, musical, and multicultural traditions.

### **1990s**

- American House develops a drama—Hats, Handkerchiefs and Fans—describing the black experience in Lima from the 1800s until the civil rights era.
- Lima Study Circles are organized in response to local unrest following the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles. Black and white citizens convene together for a series of conversations guided by curriculum from Everyday Democracy Inc.
- Annual Diversity Day celebrations begin and are presented by a volunteer committee.

## 2000s

- Bluffton University convenes community leaders with diverse backgrounds to identify major issues impeding development in Lima/Allen County.
- Common Threads 2001: Bluffton University hosts a conference on trust among leaders and respecting differences. Sojourn Theatre Company prepares monologues for the first arts-based small-group civic dialogue sessions, led by Michael Rohd and Pat Romney.
- Common Threads 2002: Passing Glances: Windows and Mirrors in Allen County, a major theatre piece created through civic dialogue, and a related planning conference featuring issues of leadership and race are the results of a Sojourn residency. Two action teams remain active: monthly Public Officials Dialogue sessions and Allen 2020, a visioning project for the county.
- Common Threads facilitated a variety of dialogue sessions for neighborhood associations and social workers conferences.
- Lima Senior High School shifts to a small school design.
- Lima City Schools sponsors two Sojourn Theatre Company residencies and trainings for teachers.
- Lima City Schools sponsors two school-district wide, arts-based civic dialogue projects: one on the meaning of shelter, and another on the loss of school landmarks.

# APPENDIX D

## LIMA SENIOR HIGH MONOLOGUES

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### Fear

I've been here 4 years now.

I came when they opened this building.

This was a new building.

I love this building.

Yeah Yeah.

We actually were down there, when this all happened-

She lives down the street from us.

When it was happening,

after the police had went in and went out the house-

They was acting crazy.

They was just pushing people-

I was out there.

There was lots of us out there from school,

asking questions.

So that's what a lot of the talk here has been.

A lot of kids are getting involved in it,

in marches and stuff-

a lot of cases are getting brought up now,

cases that people didn't say before,

that they were afraid to say before-

they're getting brought up now.

Here at school, when police come by,

for our little lockdowns and what not

If you're still in the hall-  
this is a big school-  
so maybe you're trying to get from one classroom to another,  
and you get caught in the halls-  
and they walk by you with their big ol' dog-

You know that's gonna put fear in you.

As far as my younger brothers-  
Do I want them to be around this? No.  
Am I thinking about moving them out to a place like Elida,  
a place that's a little more different from here?  
Yes.

The police are angry right now-  
they're on the spot,  
and they're feeling angry,  
and they're taking that anger out on kids who are mixed,  
or kids who are Black-  
they see us driving around, they stop us- they're angry.

It's a revolving cycle-  
people get angry at the police,  
the police get angry at people- they pulled my cousin over the other day-

Its kind of crazy-  
my younger brothers, they see police around, they stand up straight-  
there's fear.  
They're fearing they're gonna go to jail.  
They see police, they'll get a fear-  
pull their seatbelt tighter, turn the music down...

If there's a fight in here at school,  
the police come in here, undo their coats so everyone can see their guns, show their authority-  
they don't need to do that here- they're the police!  
You're in a high school!

You're a citizen just like us- you're a person just like us- and its unacceptable.

What's gonna end up happening, the police are gonna really get hurt- you see what I'm saying? You  
keep treating people like this, all that fear inside of folks-

Its gonna turn into anger. Its just gonna blow up on them- you see what I'm saying?

You never know when that's gonna spark off- that's just a fire waiting to happen. You never know  
when its gonna ignite.

A lot of students are hurt, over what happened. And a lot of teachers, they're starting to realize what  
goes on, what's going on, and they're starting to be more caring.

People used to think a lot of our stories were made up, and now- people hear us, and know that  
some of the stories we've been talking about all this time, its been real, you know?

The stories are real. So, maybe,  
people start to understand a little better.

### **Race card**

I don't think race is a big deal here. I really don't.

I think everybody gets treated fairly, you know, equally.

Except, it seems like sometimes black,  
or African American students,  
don't get in as much trouble sometimes just because the administrators are threatened by their  
parents or somebody coming and saying-  
oh, it's just cause I'm black.  
Because people, they do that a lot.

It's kind of like what's happening now in the town.  
You know, with the shooting that just happened.  
Everybody thinks it's a racial thing  
because it was a white cop who shot a black girl.  
And maybe that kind of stuff happens around here,  
I don't know.  
That's the thing, see, I don't know what happened in there.  
I don't know what happened inside the house.  
Maybe if I were that cop and I saw somebody holding something,  
I might shoot too.  
And it wouldn't be because a person was white or black or whatever.  
It would just be because I needed to, you know, protect myself...  
But everybody wants to jump to conclusions.

So what are the cops going to do now?  
Are they supposed to be scared to do their jobs?  
What good is that?  
What good does it do to have police that are afraid to enforce the law because somebody might tell them they're being racist?  
It can't always be about race.  
They have to get it right some of the time.  
Right?

I mean, there are drugs in Lima.  
There is crime in Lima.  
It's their job to stop all that.

Don't we still want them to do their job?

## **Assumptions**

The reputation the south side has is ah...  
lotta raids, a lotta drug activity out there.

A lotta lives have been claimed out there, but I also say  
you can die in Shawnee,  
you can get killed in Shawnee if you be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It's just the reputation that we have.

Ever since I've been living there,  
I've been living there for ten years now and I have been hearing the same thing-  
"Oh, the south side is dangerous, it's no where any one should be living at or raising small kids."

But I wouldn't live anywhere else.

Two summers ago, there was a lot of drug raids and there were gang activities where people were  
getting shot—  
one guy actually died right around the corner from my house  
I'm like-  
wow, no wonder we have this reputation cause stuff like this goes on.

And it never, it never was that close to my home-  
my street was kind of quiet, but it still, it still happened.  
You hear the gunshots and the police sirens and everything in the back and then you hear on the  
news someone had been shot and killed so I'm like-  
wow, I cannot believe that's happening where I live at, where I call home.

No wonder all my friends don't wanna come over, you know, cause they're scared.

It was my ninth year living over there and I just-  
but I still didn't feel any different about it.

I still called it home.

People around here have so many assumptions, you know.

I think people's perception is if you live on the south side, you're all black-  
if you live north or west, it's all white.

Like you hear one thing, and you know another thing- automatic.

You see people runnin' around here—big rims, w/ nice cars, nice clothes,  
you automatically assume they're drug dealers.

Some of them aren't—there's some that are—but some aren't.

If you see, like a white person w/ rims you might think- he's a nice worker, got a nice car  
but

if you see a black man then you automatically assume he's a drug dealer.

Everyone's got assumptions

and then what you see-

its all determined by what you already assumed.

Its like, what you see has gotta prove what you think you already know-  
but it doesn't always work that way.

Stereotypes, people really stereotype. That's just how it is in Lima.

Well, that's how it is everywhere.

### **I hang with everyone**

I hang out with everybody.

I mean, the school's half white and half black  
and I got white friends, I've got black friends,  
I've got gothic friends and, like, geek friends.

I mean, I am part of every group.

I don't really notice the difference between groups, you know?

They're all people.

We have people in National Honor Society of all different races, white and black people on the sports teams. Some of my closest friends may be of my particular background, but from my perspective, you know, I could get along with anybody.

I'm not choosy.

I mean, when you walk into the cafeteria

you notice that all the white people are on the right side of the room and all the black people are on the left side, but you know,

people tend to hang out with people that are similar

who they can relate with better

you know, but that's not racism.

I just think people interact with who you can relate to most.

Everybody says that Lima has this racial tension

but I feel like it's just like, one incident happens

and for some reason it becomes an example of the whole rest of the town

but I feel like, going to Lima Senior,

I feel like we're a pretty progressive school.

We don't have a lot of racial issues.

I guess, like an example is

we tell a lot of "racist" jokes

but like,

we all laugh at them and everybody thinks they're funny so people aren't like

"come on man",

you know?

I just feel like in a community where racism was like a hot button issue you couldn't do that.

It would get people on edge and all, you know?

Racism is like almost something we've moved past.

I mean, stuff comes up,

but I don't think anybody in Lima Senior is a racist.

It's so not an issue to the point that it's funny.

I mean, there are like white kids that try to act black

and it's like kind of a joke

and I know that like when my black friend hangs out with me

he'll go back to his other friends and they'll be all

"oh, hangin out with the white kid! You gonna go play golf?"

I don't know, I just don't think race is really an issue.

### **More**

I like school, its all good here,

I'm working hard- my grades are good.

I've been doing alright lately.

I got all kinds of friends,

I got teachers I like-

This is a good place, its good.

Its mostly all good.

I do have some teachers –

I've been interacting lately with some teachers with more of a mouthy approach,

when they talk to a student-

they kind of talk down to us.

And yeah, I feel like even though I'm a student,

I should have a little more respect than what teachers sometimes give us.

I even think sometimes it has to do with what color you are,  
kind of in the way they talk to us-  
with me being African American  
I see how some teachers kind of –  
ok, some black people will like, be saggin or something like that  
and they'll pinpoint them out  
but the white dudes that try to act black and they're doin pretty much the same thing,  
and never really say nothing bout them.  
And if they see a black student messin' around in the hall they might be like-  
oh well, they ain't really gonna graduate anyway.  
But a white person,  
they'll be like-  
you need to get to class so you can like try to graduate.  
It's not always fair.  
Actually, you know what I want-  
more black teachers.  
Because there's mostly white teachers here, it's like 95 percent or something-  
There's not a lot of people who look like me that I can look up to or go to for help or whatever.

I mean  
if I think about what I would want- if you ask me that-  
I feel like, I want more people really looking out for me in the schools.  
That's what I want-more people looking out especially for me.

But, its all good.  
Its good here.  
Things are good.