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## Peace shattered, fear revisits a Boston neighborhood

The Boston Globe

By Meghan E. Irons, Globe Staff | September 25, 2010

The owner of a portrait studio shuts his shop hours early, worried about dangers lurking outside. A young mother won't let her children play out front anymore, fearful of more violence. And hair stylists at a local salon lock the doors in broad daylight, careful about whom they let inside.

"If we don't know the person, we don't open it," said the salon's 25-year-old manager, Areles Zapata, as she gave a client a wash and set one recent afternoon.

One month after a hail of gunfire shattered a long-sought, hard-earned sense of peace near Egleston Square, residents and merchants have worries about safety that many had thought were consigned to the past.

A bustling crossroads straddling Roxbury and Jamaica Plain, the square has struggled to lift itself from the haunting images of gang violence in the 1980s and '90s. Residents and leaders labored to rebuild a sense of pride in the area, restoring old apartment buildings into homes, luring businesses back into vacant storefronts, starting youth programs, and erecting a peace garden in a garbage-strewn vacant lot, planting seeds of hope there.

But two shootings last month that injured eight people on Washington Street near Boylston Street have stirred up memories of the dark years in this cultural melting pot, just as leaders and residents were scrambling to keep a local YMCA teen center program running after 20 years.

"We've worked very hard to bring back Egleston, and we don't want to see it backslide," said Bill Minkle, a community advocate whose group, the Ecumenical Social Action Committee, helped build the peace garden. "That's my biggest concern."

On Aug. 12, gunfire outside 3137 Washington St. shook residents from their sleep around 12:30 a.m. Three people were hurt, although their injuries were not life-threatening. Three days later, five males were shot in the afternoon in front of 3151 Washington St. in violence that police call gang-related.

The brazen gunfire alarmed residents, who met with the police and hashed out ideas for a crime watch and peace events. Police posted cruisers at the square daily, and added a foot-patrol officer during the day to supplement two officers who walk the streets at night. The city also assigned two new street workers to work with neighborhood youth.

The heightened police presence since the shootings has resulted in 28 arrests on a wide range of charges, though no one has been arrested in the two shootings last month, Police Commissioner Edward F. Davis wrote in a recent letter to the community. Davis called police investigations of the shootings "extremely active" and urged more cooperation with residents and leaders.

The quick action by the police and the community is consolation for some in the square.

"I feel safer now because the police are around," said barber Jose Rojas, as men waiting their turn played a vigorous game of checkers.

Onesimo Martinez, a businessman in the square for 30 years, said the recent events have galvanized the community's resolve to make Egleston a safe place to live and work.

"Now we have to get that message across to the kids," said Martinez, who heads the square's merchants association. "This is a good community."

But Anibal Color is not taking any chances. The photographer, whose store window displays portraits of girls posing for their quinceañera (15th birthday) celebrations, said he keeps his young children indoors and closes up

his shop about two hours earlier than usual. The shootings, he said, have hurt business.

"Many people don't come and spend money anymore," he said.

On a recent day, a few people were out, but merchants and some residents say the neighborhood is on edge.

"I still feel scared and worried that if I'm out front someone will start shooting again," said Julia Hernandez, a 29-year-old mother of three who lives near where the shootings occurred. She said she has restricted her children to the backyard, no longer letting them play in front of their apartment building.

"I feel like everyone knows not to be out there at a certain time, especially when there's no cops," she said. "Usually, I go outside and I see nobody out there — like everybody in the neighborhood knows."

Such sentiments may help community leaders and residents make the case for why the YMCA's teen center should remain. While there are other teen programs in the neighborhood, residents say the YMCA is the only place where teens can come to shoot pool and simply hang out.

YMCA spokeswoman Kelley Rice said too few teens come — about 10 to 12 a day — and the Y cannot afford to spend the \$5,800-a-month rent to keep it open.

The landlord, Urban Edge, has since lowered the rent by \$1,000, persuading the Y to stay past its September closing date to Dec. 31. The Y, Rice said, is focusing on programs in buildings it owns.

If the Y departs its home at the Father Jack Roussin Community Center it would leave a huge void in the community, neighborhood leaders say, and they are scrambling to find alternative programs to replace it should the YMCA choose not to return.

"It's definitely a stress for us," said Jennifer Lewis, a program coordinator at the Center for Teen Empowerment in the square.

"It just feels like we have been fighting to keep the things open that youths need in this area."

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