

A Community Initiative for Juvenile Justice: Why Not Your Community Too?

by Gary J. Simson*

Bringing Youth Education and Police Training to Majority-Minority City

From 2014 to 2021 I served on the board of directors of Strategies for Youth (SFY), a nonprofit organization known for its innovative and widely used programs of youth education and youth-focused police training. Toward the end of 2018, I proposed to Lisa Thureau, founder and executive director of SFY, that I be authorized to organize and head an initiative in Macon, GA—the city where I have been living since 2010—to raise the funds needed to bring SFY's youth-education and police-training services to Macon. By that time, I was very familiar with the proven track record of those services in cities across the U.S. to reduce tensions, build trust, and increase cooperation between police and youth. In addition, though still a relative newcomer to Macon, I had seen and read enough to recognize Macon's urgent need for those services.

Macon is a poor, majority-minority city, with a troubled racial history (Manis, 2004). Located in central Georgia, Macon is only about 85 miles from Atlanta, but it bears little resemblance to that bustling, thriving metropolis. In hopes of achieving a more efficient and effective government and boosting the local economy, Macon, the longtime county seat of Bibb County, formed a consolidated government in 2014 with the county. (Formally denominated "Macon-Bibb County," the new governmental entity is widely known simply as "Macon," which is the convention I will adopt here.) Macon now encompasses a land area of 250 square miles—almost five times larger than the land area it

occupied before consolidation (Wikipedia). As of the 2010 census, Macon's population was approximately 90,000, with 68% African-American and 29% White (CensusViewer). After consolidation, Macon's population became about 150,000. Although African-Americans still constitute a majority of the population, they are not much more than half, and Whites are now about two-fifths (U.S. Census Bureau).

Most importantly, one thing that did not significantly change as a result of consolidation was the dire economic straits that have plagued so many of

First Example of Private Fundraising to Provide SFY Services

When I proposed a "Strategies for Youth Macon Initiative," I was well aware that, of the many cities across the country where SFY had provided services, not a single one had received those services as a result of a private fundraising effort. They all had received the services entirely, or almost entirely, thanks to federal, state, or local government funding—funding alternatives for Macon that I had already explored with an utter lack of success. I also recognized that Macon is not a place where one could expect to raise from a

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Macon's residents. Perhaps such change is yet to come, but a few sobering statistics suggest that it is still no more than a distant hope: a poverty rate of 25%—double the national rate; a median family income slightly above \$40,000—less than two-thirds the U.S. median; a median property value of \$120,000—half the U.S. median; and the list goes on (Data USA). If I had any doubt by 2018 about the potential in Macon for a tragedy like those in Ferguson, MO, Cleveland, OH, and other cities, a couple of facts about Macon's youth and its law enforcement officers made it all too clear. A substantial percentage of youth no longer in school were unemployed (Technical College of Georgia). In addition, the inadequacies in law enforcement training that SFY had documented several years earlier persisted: Only a handful of the hundreds of hours of training that Georgia law enforcement officers received in the academy dealt with juvenile justice, and none of those few hours focused on preparing the officers for the unique challenges posed by interacting with youth rather than adults (Strategies for Youth, 2013).

few generous donors the approximately \$110,000 needed to pay for providing its law enforcement officers and youth with SFY's services.

In short, my proposed SFY Macon Initiative clearly faced formidable challenges, but as I told Lisa, those challenges are what made Macon an almost perfect place for the first private fundraising effort of this sort. Macon could be a trendsetter in a way that cities with fewer challenges could not. If private fundraising could enable Macon to enlist SFY's assistance, why couldn't it have similar success elsewhere? In one of his many classics, "New York, New York," Frank Sinatra sang, "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere." By the same token, if a private fundraising initiative for SFY's services could "make it" in Macon, that would go a long way toward showing that such an initiative could be successful in other communities, too.

Being much more conversant than Lisa with the local community, I was prepared to take the lead in the Initiative, and Lisa assured me that she would do everything

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she could to ensure the Initiative's success. Hearing that from Lisa, who is easily one of the most creative and hardworking people I had ever met, was all I needed. We agreed to go forward with the Initiative and give it our best shot.

Identifying Stakeholders for Fundraising Committee

How could we get the Initiative off to a strong start? Lisa and I quickly resolved that we would do well not to try to reinvent the wheel. We enlisted the assistance for seven or eight hours of an outstanding consultant with whom Lisa had effectively collaborated before. Over the years the consultant had helped clients organize a wide variety of fundraising campaigns, but she had never done the kind of campaign that we were contemplating, and she was not accustomed to trying to raise funds from a group of donors as limited in giving capacity as the great majority of Macon residents and businesses. Nonetheless, her insights were invaluable in enabling the three of us to have several very productive brainstorming sessions on the phone over the course of two to three months. Ultimately, we came up with a plan of action that appeared to be sufficiently detailed to enable the Initiative to move forward but not so detailed as to leave too little room for the Initiative to adapt to unanticipated events.

We obviously needed to be attentive to the challenges that Macon presented, but as we recognized early on, we needed to be no less attentive to the aspects of Macon that presented opportunities. Largely because it is home to one of the state's five law schools—Mercer University School of Law—Macon has a significantly larger and more high-powered legal community than one would expect to find in a city of its size. Although not all lawyers think the same, they do tend to have a greater understanding of, and sensitivity to, juvenile justice issues than most people. In Macon, they also tend to have more resources than most and to play a more prominent role in local government and civic affairs. As a result, the Macon legal community would be an important source of funding for the Initiative, as well as people to assume leadership roles in the Initiative.

Another Macon asset was the city's unusually strong sense of community. Macon lags far behind Atlanta in

economic growth, but in my view, it has a charm and beauty that Atlanta cannot begin to match. For many residents, this provides an adhesive and a source of pride. If your idea of a nice place to live does not include lots of bright lights and is a place where, as in "Cheers," everybody (or at least a high percentage of people) knows your name, Macon has a great deal to recommend it. A key ingredient of the Initiative had to be raising Macon residents' awareness of the need for, and availability of, SFY's services. That was a less daunting task in Macon than in cities not so tightly knit.

As the consultant advised, a key first step in any fundraising effort of this sort is to create a fundraising committee. We agreed that, to be effective, the committee needed to be diverse in various respects, including in its representation of the several key constituencies in Macon's juvenile justice system. SFY is a truly nonpartisan organization, and we took as a given that the Macon Initiative needed to be the same. Like SFY, the Initiative started from the proposition that neither law enforcement officers nor young people are the bad guys. Rather, there is a major societal problem to be solved, and a good solution will emerge only if everyone involved in the juvenile justice system works together toward the same end.

In forming a committee, we were also very mindful of the need to include people with a variety of different skills. Obviously, it would be helpful, for example, to have two or three committee members reasonably adept at event planning or publicity or both. Above all, there had to be at least several members not shy about asking people for contributions and reasonably competent at doing so.

For the Initiative to be successful, Lisa would need to be involved to some extent in the fundraising. But Lisa did not have the detailed knowledge of the Macon community needed to identify promising prospects nor the local ties that many Macon residents undoubtedly would find important in deciding whether to contribute to the Initiative. Also, for SFY to continue making a mark nationally, the Initiative had to occupy only a small part of Lisa's time.

Having spent six years as a law school dean at Case Western Reserve and Mercer, I could offer significant experience, even if not awe-inspiring talent, in fundraising, and my time as dean at Mercer

gave me a good sense of promising prospects in the community. In addition, we had the good fortune to be able to recruit to the committee one person with years of experience as a volunteer fundraiser for local historical and cultural preservation projects, as well as a few people with fundraising insights to share based on years of service on local foundation boards.

By early March 2019, the committee was complete, and we agreed to call it the "Strategies for Youth Macon Task Force." It consisted of 20 Macon residents drawn from public and private sectors. They included two high-level officers in the Sheriff's Office, two attorneys in the juvenile division of the Public Defender's Office, the chief judge of the Juvenile Court, a state trial court judge (elevated to the Georgia Court of Appeals in 2020 and to the Georgia Supreme Court in 2021), a former chief deputy superintendent and interim superintendent of the local school district, an executive director of a youth-serving organization, two journalists, two clergy, a criminal defense attorney, a civil practice attorney, three active or retired members of the Mercer law faculty, and three Mercer law students.

Task Force Committee Member Recruitment

As you would expect, not everyone invited to serve on the task force agreed to do so, but the percentage of those invited who accepted was quite high. I said or did several things that probably contributed to that high acceptance rate. None of those things was all that innovative. However, for those of you open to the idea of mounting an initiative like the Macon one in your community, it may be worthwhile for me to mention a few of them here.

Most importantly, I did not invite anyone simply by phoning. Instead, I sent an email asking the person to *consider* serving on the task force and saying that I would be back in touch in a few days to try to schedule a time to talk. In that email, I briefly described SFY and its youth-education and police-training programs and explained the urgency of bringing those programs to Macon. I also attached materials describing SFY and its programs in considerable detail. Most of the materials were written by SFY, but to underline SFY's national reputation, I also included,

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for example, an excellent article about SFY in *The Atlantic* (J. Lantigua-Williams, 2016). In emailing potential task force members, I proceeded at first with only several people, all well-known to almost everyone in Macon. Then, after getting a few acceptances, I made sure to mention in my subsequent emails the names of those who had already agreed to serve.

I emphasized in the email that I was very aware of the many demands on the recipient's time. I said that, with those demands in mind, I had divided the task force's work into three focus areas—program development and implementation, public relations and community engagement, and event organizing—and would be asking each member to work in only one of the three areas. Knowing all too well from my years as a

clergy member of the task force at his church. Lisa was the only speaker at that reception, and later the same afternoon, she gave a public lecture on juvenile justice at the law school.

Although neither the Sheriff nor the School Superintendent had resources to help fund the Initiative, their express support of the Initiative was plainly essential to its success. With that in mind, Lisa and I took advantage of her presence in Macon for the week to meet in person with them and several others who work closely with them. Lisa and I had a number of other meetings that week, including—thanks to connections made by one of my friends—meetings with the executive directors of Macon's two largest foundations.

Early Strategic Moves

Having a carefully planned and well-organized kickoff week for the Initiative

Getting a community initiative off the ground means fund raising—lots of it.

dean how much almost everyone dreads spending hours in meetings, I promised that I would call no more than two meetings of the entire task force over the course of the Initiative, and I said that I would almost always rely on emails when I needed to provide information to, or solicit input from, the entire group. Invoking a metaphor of spokes on a wheel with me at the hub, I noted that task force members' primary means of communication with regard to any tasks undertaken as part of the Initiative would be one-on-one with me.

In-Person Initiative Launch

To launch the Initiative, Lisa came to Macon in late March 2019 for a week of receptions, meetings, and the like. Two of the receptions were in the evening—one at my home and the other at another task force member's home. The task force members were invited to both receptions and were encouraged to extend invitations to friends and acquaintances whom they thought might be interested in the Initiative. Lisa spoke at both receptions, and several task force members spoke at one or the other. There was also an interfaith lunchtime reception for religious leaders hosted by

proved to be a good strategic move. Most obviously, the evening receptions produced two large pledges totaling \$15,000. In addition, although we did not make funding proposals to either of the foundation directors we met, we were very pleasantly surprised several weeks later to receive a contribution of \$7,500 from one of the foundations.

Sponsorship Levels. A few other strategic moves in those early months of the Initiative also bore fruit. We decided to create sponsorship levels for donors—Gold (\$5,000), Silver (\$2,500), and Bronze (\$1,000)—and designed a sponsorship pamphlet to send as an email attachment to potential donors. The pamphlet identified the different kinds of public recognition that the donors at each level would receive. All sponsors would be listed by level several times in *The Macon Telegraph*, Macon's only local newspaper. Other forms of recognition would include being listed on banners displayed when youth compete at "Juvenile Justice Jeopardy"—SFY's award-winning youth-education tool modeled after the "Jeopardy!" game of television fame—and being listed on *Think About It First!* Cards created by SFY for distribution to area youth.

Creating sponsorship levels is obviously a familiar fundraising device. Making it work, however, calls for a fair amount of thought. How much must someone donate to achieve each of the different sponsorship levels? What kinds of recognition should sponsors at each level receive? The answers to both questions can sensibly vary quite a bit depending on the target audience. Lisa, the consultant, and I had a conversation that is instructive in that regard. The topic was the size gift needed for each level, and I asked the consultant what was typical in the fundraising campaigns she had helped direct. She responded that, in a couple of recent campaigns for nonprofits in the Boston area, she had recommended, and the nonprofits had adopted, gift levels of \$25,000, \$10,000, and \$5,000. After giving the matter a few minutes' thought, I replied that I liked the 5:1 relationship of the top level to the bottom and the 2:1 relationship of the middle level to the bottom, but that to make the levels work for Macon, we probably needed to multiply each of the dollar amounts by 20%.

Newspaper Advertisements and Donor Recognition. Using *The Macon Telegraph* to advantage extended well beyond publicly recognizing our donors. We went to great lengths to make our ads serve as a major vehicle for getting out the word about the Initiative and attracting new donors. I personally wrote the text for the Initiative's three ads, each of which ran three times. The first ad appeared in Spring 2019, the second in late Summer 2019, and the third early in 2020.

Attention-Grabbing Graphic Design. I was eager to have the ads look very professional and really grab people's attention. However, when I contacted a few local businesses that do graphic design, I discovered that the going rate in Macon, though undoubtedly less than in Atlanta and other large cities, was significantly more than the Initiative could reasonably afford.

I decided to contact one of my former students living in Macon to see if he had any suggestions. He is not only a very able attorney but also a talented artist, and he connected me with a friend of his who, along with her full-time job, does graphic design on the side as a part-time business. When I asked about her

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availability to do the ads and her rate, she asked me to describe the Initiative more fully. After I did, she simply said, "That's a great thing for Macon. I'll do it." I asked her again about her rate, and the number she gave me was so low that I told her that I would pay her that amount and list her graphic design business in the ad as a Bronze sponsor for a \$1,000 in-kind gift. Best of all, when she sent me the first ad to review before it went to press, I saw instantly that we had hit the jackpot in hiring her. Her ads were truly works of art.

"Great Thing for Macon" Inspires Unexpected Support. Locating such a talented graphic designer for such a reasonable price plainly involved quite a bit of luck. But I also think the entire episode epitomized the way this Initiative captured people's imagination and created its own good luck.

Consider a related series of events that enabled me to use the graphic designer's talents to great advantage. Not long after the Initiative got under way, I wrote to an editor of *The Telegraph*, described the Initiative, and asked if the paper would consider donating free advertising space. When I wrote, I did not understand that such a decision would not be made by *The Telegraph*, but instead by the McClatchy Company, a publishing company based in California that owns *The Telegraph* and a number of other local newspapers across the country. The editor wrote back promptly and explained the limits of *The Telegraph's* authority. He then told me how much he liked the Initiative and that he had reached out to a regional manager whom he thought would share his enthusiasm. Within a few days, I heard from McClatchy's community relations manager for the eastern part of the country. She made clear her eagerness to help our effort and promised to pursue the matter with her superiors soon. Several days later, I heard from her again, this time to tell me that McClatchy was happy to award the Initiative \$10,000 in free advertising space—an amount about four times greater than my fondest hope.

Matching Gift. The final strategic move that I will discuss is one that we had in mind early on but could not attempt to implement until we got some unexpected assistance: A donor contacted us about

making an anonymous \$20,000 gift. Our strategic move was asking the donor not to make the gift outright, but instead to make it as a matching gift opportunity. As we subsequently explained in an ad in *The Telegraph*, the donor agreed to match contributions up to a total of \$20,000, and if a contribution plus the match added up to a sponsorship-level gift, the contributor would be given recognition as a sponsor in *The Telegraph* and elsewhere. Thus, a contributor could make a \$500 gift and be listed as a Bronze sponsor, a \$1,250 gift and be listed as a Silver sponsor, or a \$2,500 gift and be listed as a Gold sponsor.

Matching gift opportunities are, of course, commonplace in fundraising

sparked by the discovery of effective vaccines, that final push almost immediately produced encouraging results. Between early December 2020 and mid-January 2021, 40 solicited gifts came in, including several in the range of \$1,000 to \$2,000. In the last couple weeks of that period, however, the stream of gifts slowed substantially, and it appeared that the Initiative might stall about \$10,000 short of the fundraising goal. In a fitting conclusion to a fundraising campaign that was many things but never dull, the campaign ended with a bang when, without any advance notice, we received a \$10,000 check from a family fund that had made one of the two large gifts that, during Lisa's visit to Macon back in March 2019,

Planning is essential—but be prepared to learn as you go, and adapt your plan based on what you learn.

campaigns of all kinds. I am not sure whether it is also common for such opportunities to include the possibility of achieving sponsorship levels at half the usual price. I am quite certain, however, that the combination of matching donors' gifts and allowing donors to achieve sponsorship levels at half the usual price had a very positive effect on the Initiative. The \$20,000 matching fund was exhausted within two months.

Final Fundraising Push to Reach Goal. By the end of 2019, we had raised more than \$75,000—enough to pay for bringing SFY to Macon to train the Sheriff's Office deputies with Policing the Teen Brain and the school resource officers (SROs) with Policing the Teen Brain in School. As 2020 got under way, we only needed to raise about \$30,000 to achieve the Initiative's fundraising goal. With those funds in hand, we would be able purchase two versions of "Juvenile Justice Jeopardy."

For various reasons—most obviously, the devastation and hardship wrought by the pandemic and the difficulty of competing with political campaigns for scarce funds in a national election year—raising the final \$30,000 proved far more difficult than we had hoped. By mid-2020, our fundraising efforts were proving so unproductive that we resolved to put further efforts on hold for several months and make one final end-of-year push.

Thanks perhaps to the arrival of the holiday season and a sense of optimism

had gotten the Initiative off to such a promising start.

Positive Reactions to SFY Training Visits

Macon has already begun to reap the benefits of the Initiative. An SFY training team has made several visits to Macon of three or four days apiece. Using SFY's train-the-trainer approach, the team has completed training a few dozen Sheriff's Office deputies who were selected for the training based on their ability to work effectively with youth and their aptitude for training others. Because there are far fewer SROs than Sheriff's Office deputies in Macon, SFY decided not to use a train-the-trainer approach with the SROs. Instead, SFY directly trained all of the SROs.

Lisa, who came to Macon for each visit as part of the SFY training team, wrote to the SFY Macon Task Force after each visit to report on the progress made. Her comments each time were very positive. Writing, for example, about an August 2020 visit to train Sheriff's Office deputies, she stated:

The training went very well. The officers were focused, engaged, interested, and willing to converse with us and raise concerns, questions, and ideas. It was clear that there is a strong interest among these officers

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in supporting youth, understanding how to help them avoid system involvement, and understanding what makes them tick.

In a similar vein, she wrote the following about an October 2020 visit to train SROs:

The results of the pre/post training surveys indicated that 100% of the officers found the training helpful, both in teaching them tactics for dealing with adolescents and in helping them better understand the

to Georgia law, the particular circumstances of Macon's youth, and the nature of police-youth relations in Macon. Soon after school is back in session, SFY staff will be visiting Macon to train game leaders, using a train-the-trainer approach. There will be no shortage of volunteers to be trained as game leaders. Over the course of the Initiative, various task force members and donors mentioned to me that they would like to become game leaders, and when I broached with a group of law school student organization leaders the possibility of their recruiting some of their organizations' members to

"I can't believe I've been doing this job for 20 years, and I'm only now hearing all these things about dealing with young people that I should have been told years ago."

psychological effects of poverty and trauma. Officers said they left the training feeling better equipped to deal with some of the most troubled students and were glad to learn of resources available to families.

In each report Lisa included comments by the trainees and their superiors. Many of those comments are memorable and truly moving. My two favorites provide a good idea of the various comments' general thrust and tone. One was a comment by the officer who supervises the SROs: "This is exactly the kind of training I was looking for. It helps our SROs treat the whole child."

The other was a comment made orally to the SFY team by a Sheriff's Office deputy at the very end of a training visit in May 2021. As Lisa recounted to me afterward, when asked for his thoughts about the training, the deputy said, "I am extremely upset." Lisa was taken aback by his remark, because her perception had been that the training had been well-received by this deputy and the others in attendance. Steeling herself for the worst, Lisa asked him to explain what had upset him so much. His response was no less surprising than his initial remark: "I can't believe I've been doing this job for 20 years, and I'm only now hearing all these things about dealing with young people that I should have been told years ago."

Preparation of the two versions of "Juvenile Justice Jeopardy"—versions that SFY calls its "street" and "school" versions—is under way. Both versions will be tailored

to become game leaders, I immediately got a very positive response.

Initiative Well Worth the Cost

As I was completing this article, an opinion piece appeared in *The New York Times* by Meryl Davids Landau, a journalist who often writes about psychology (Davids Landau). Davids Landau focused on the training that officers in an Indiana county's Sheriff's Office have been receiving—training that she identified as SFY's Policing the Teen Brain program. She left no doubt how very impressed she was by the sophistication of the training—in particular, the brain science that informs its instruction about interacting with youth—and by the results that have been achieved in the particular Indiana county in the years since the training began. Davids Landau noted that "many police departments that have contacted Strategies for Youth have balked at the price," and she conceded that the "cost is especially challenging at a time when cities are strapped for funds." Her ultimate position, however, was that one way or another a city needs to come up with the money. As she explained, "the alternative, putting kids in detention who don't need to be there, is costly, too," and "[e]ven more important, unnecessary detentions have serious consequences."

As should be apparent, I see the costs and benefits of a city's decision whether to purchase SFY's services in very similar terms. If anything, I see them as even more clearly favoring a decision to

purchase those services. In light of all the expertise and creativity that have gone into developing and refining SFY's programs and all the time and effort that go into delivering those programs, I frankly regard the price that SFY charges for its services as remarkably modest. But what if a community's elected local officials see things differently and decide not to purchase SFY's services, and neither state nor federal government is willing to fill the void and provide funding consistent with a more far-sighted view? As I hope I have persuaded some of you, the answer lies in your hands. If Macon could succeed in raising the money needed for SFY's services, your community can too.

Strategies for Youth Resources

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