Law and order:

Com4Unity Blacktown CBD

Photo by Adam Hollingworth | Hired Gun | Mark Wright

From the early to mid-2000s, South Sudanese refugees began arriving in large numbers in Blacktown, where public and low-cost housing was available. Soon, groups of young, tall, black men could be seen hanging around the Blacktown shops.

The Council felt unprepared, and frustrated that neither the federal nor state government had provided any notice – let alone funding – to help it manage a significant change to the composition of its population. Schools, already under pressure in a low-income area, struggled to cope with troubled students who spoke little English. Many locals were also unhappy. Blacktown faced the biggest test of its multiculturalism in his history.

"There was a real fear at the time," says Greenway MP Michelle Rowland, who was then a Blacktown councillor. "Council got this constant feedback: 'There are all these tall, dark people standing around and I feel intimidated. This is not the Blacktown I used to know, I don't feel like I belong here any more.' I always thought it was bizarre: doesn't everyone stand around? You're just noting that they're black. But the fact that it never boiled over into race riots was really lucky." Rowland says the Howard Government had not provided enough services to manage the change. "Some non-government organisations stepped in to help but a lot of the work fell to the local area command of the police."

The man Rowland is talking about, Mark Wright, has booked a room at Blacktown Council for our interview. Tall, with no sign of grey hair, he has at the age of 59 swapped his police uniform for jeans and a loose-fitting white shirt. He is a consultant now, and a mentor at a few organisations, including AFL club Greater Western Sydney. The printed PowerPoint presentation in his hand is entitled Com4Unity, and Wright proudly explains the wordplay: "It stands for Connecting Our Minds for Unity, with the 4 meaning the fourth floor of Westpoint."

Wright took over as commander of Blacktown Police in 2008. He had been a cop since the age of 19, had worked in the drug squad, undercover unit and surveillance branch, but this was his first command of a major station, in an area that he says his predecessor called "Chernobyl". Wright's brief, or part of it, was to reduce youth crime. The two main trouble sites were Blacktown Station and Westpoint mall.

Westpoint had just become the first shopping centre in Sydney to ban school students during school hours. "We were all scared," Harry Bevitt, a juice bar owner, told 7.30 in 2012. "We had gangs jumping the counter in the night time and stealing whatever wasn't bolted down - drinks, machinery, knives." Businesses were leaving the mall. "There were scuffles all the time, it was very dangerous to go into Westpoint," says Cate Sydes, then CEO of Marist Youth Care, which has a big office in Blacktown.

Westpoint has a stage on its fourth floor, an open area surrounded by cafes and restaurants that leads to the centre's car park. Wright says young Sudanese men were using the stage as a place to krump, a hip-hop dance with slow, exaggerated arm movements performed to the boom of a ghetto blaster. The men were not hassling anyone but "it was causing confrontation. They had adopted American dress, baseball hats sideways, gold chains - people were scared, thought they were gangsters." Security guards would kick them off the stage, they would move to the car park and keep dancing, until the police showed up.

"The police had grabbed about six of these poor Sudanese kids, bundled them into the paddy wagon and taken them to the station," the then operations manager of Westpoint, George Giannakos, told researcher Sophie Yates. Giannakos thought: "This is not on. We should be saying, 'Hey guys, disperse, stop dancing in the car park'." The Westpoint manager ran to the police station to say he didn't want the young men arrested. "That was the first time I met Mark Wright. Mark said, 'Oh, look, that's good, we won't press charges.' He saw that as an opportunity."

Wright knew he needed allies like Giannakos. And he needed time. Tensions around Westpoint were growing. He says some young Sudanese men would clash with security guards then run outside the centre and stand, arms crossed, on a line beyond which they knew the guards had no authority. Others were accusing police of targeting and sometimes beating them.

In his first meeting, Wright sat down with Ajang Biar, a Sudanese community leader, and Jorge Aroche of the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors. Biar said he had phone recordings made by young Sudanese men of police calling them "black bastards". Wright says he told him: "If you play me that I am obliged to take it forward as an official complaint. The alternative - give me three months to have a look around and see what I can find out."

He learnt that a problem was growing conflict between young men from Islander and Sudanese backgrounds. Thursday night at Westpoint was known as "fight night."

Crowds of young people would gather on the fourth floor, and "some Sudanese and Islander boys would go hell for leather," Wright says.

But "it wasn't just Sudanese — Anglo-Saxon, Islanders, Indigenous, Turkish, Filipino, other Africans – you name it," he said. He did not believe the conflict had "a racial undertone. I think it was just kids, testosterone. They were having a go at people from a different group." The media would portray the fights as melees but usually it was "two or three kids punching on, and the rest watching."

Social media swelled the size of the crowd: word of a fight would go out and people would jump on a train and come from as far as Campbelltown, 50 kilometres away, to watch. A crucial step Wright and his officers took was to get a bail condition imposed on any adult not from Blacktown who had been convicted of affray: if they were caught back in the area they would be charged with a breach of bail. That reduced trouble a lot. It also showed that many Blacktown youth were getting an unfair rap for the fights.

Beyond that change, Wright says he had no plan, just two principles: build relationships in the good times, "not when they go pear-shaped," and get everyone with a stake in the problem around the table. These two principles condensed into two words that Wright wrote on a Post-it note and carried in his wallet: Mutual Respect.

He began by holding meetings in a room in Westpoint mall. The eight or nine people around the table represented Blacktown communities, churches, Westpoint, police and a welfare organisation, Marist Youth Care. He had one question: what do we do?

Wright suggested holding weekly walks through the shopping centre, some during the day, some on "fight night". The walkers would be people around the table or their colleagues, three police officers, and a principal or deputy principal from a local school. The goal was simply to talk to young people, get to know them, without confrontation.

Wright made all his 180 operations officers do at least one walk, and he walked every Thursday for two years. Community elders who walked with police also played a vital role. Wright says with a smile that one Islander woman stood up in church the following Sunday and scolded parents: do you know what your children are up to, what your girls are wearing? "It was good – the message was going out in communities."

The second idea involved regular soccer matches between high school teams and police — "cops and kids running around a paddock having fun, with the whole school coming out to watch." Wright says the games brought another benefit: "That night those kids would be in Westpoint, and the cops would be there on shift, and

[5] This section draws on interviews conducted by Sophie Yates for a case study of Com4Unity for the Australia New Zealand School of Government and Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

the kids would come over and say, 'Got past ya today.' They'd have a bit of friendly banter, start to build a bit of a relationship." In time, the police-school games became the annual Com4Unity Cup, held at the Blacktown Workers Club grounds, with Council staff and Rotary putting on a sausage sizzle.

The third idea: youth workers suggested asking young people at Westpoint and around the station what they most wanted to see in Blacktown. Of the 2500 surveyed, most said they wanted more music, dance and drama. Joanne (JoJo) and Joe Tau, youth workers of Samoan background who were married at the time, came up with the idea of Switch, a dance and music showcase to be held on the same Westpoint stage where young people and security guards used to clash. They called it Switch, because "it was like a light switch, you dance to come out of the dark and come into the light".

Most importantly, JoJo Tau said the young people themselves had to run it. "Let the kids take ownership of it, let's mentor them so they take pride in what they're doing and believe in what they're delivering."

Tau told Yates about the excitement Switch generated. Everyone pitched in. "Joe and I came up with the program, and then we were like, 'We need a venue.' Westpoint goes, 'I can get the venue for you guys.' And then, 'We need some food for the kids.' Hillsong was like, 'I'll bring that.' We needed some help; Marist said, 'I'll bring some youth workers for you.' That's exactly how it worked for a long time. It was about bringing what we had and making it work."

For more than seven years, Switch – or Beat Town Showcase, its other name – ran on Thursday nights on the Westpoint stage, organised, run and DJed by young people. Blacktown's mayor at that time, Alan Pendleton, and another councillor, current mayor Tony Bleasdale, would sit in the front row. "I still get goosebumps when I think about it," Wright says. "Rotary had the barbecue going, you'd have 300 or 400 people, singing, dancing, krumping – that top floor was pumping."

"The gangs of kids that were hanging around hated each other, but they didn't know each other," said Cate Sydes, the then CEO of Marist Youth Care. "Once they started organising this stuff, the Africans saw that the Filipinos were actually nice people ... We would have the United Nations on the stage, it was just a magnificent thing."

The initiative generated other ideas, such as homework clubs, and workshops for 40 to 60 young people on how to apply for jobs. Westpoint gave some of the young people jobs. "We went from kids ratting shopping centres to packing shelves," Wright says. In 2014, after the gang rape of a girl of Islander background sparked new clashes between Islander and

African men, Joe and JoJo Tau and police staged a Unity Walk through Blacktown streets to call for an end to violence.

Not all Blacktown police were happy with Wright's initiatives, and some of his critics were his senior managers. "Some had the attitude, 'Our job is not to play with kids,'" Wright says. But he insists the initiative was never about being soft on crime or criminals. In fact, he says, pointing to his PowerPoint slides, "these stats would save me."

Graphs on the slides show steady drops in robberies, car thefts, and breaking and entering in the years between 2007 and 2011. Giannakos said car thefts from Westpoint car park dropped from one a day to zero. Wright thinks crime rates dropped not because the young people involved in Com4Unity had previously been criminals, but because the initiative's success freed up police to tackle other crime instead of having to constantly patrol Westpoint and other youth hangouts.

He thinks about two-thirds of his staff supported the initiative. "The quality of the Sudanese leadership was important. When Ajang Biar spoke to my young cops they hung off his every word."

But one lesson that comes out of tough, neglected places like Blacktown is that good ideas and programs can struggle to survive.

In 2014, Wright left the job. His successor showed little interest in the project. Giannakos also moved to a new job, and Sydes's role at Marist Youth Care expanded, leaving her with less time. Word had spread among police forces about Com4Unity, and police from Melbourne and even Canada came to have a look. But when a senior commander from Logan, a tough part of Brisbane, decided to investigate the initiative, he delegated the task to a junior constable. The man called Wright and asked him to "send through the brochure." Four or five years ago, Com4Unity quietly died.

Sydes said the problem was that as people moved on, their successors saw only the crop, not the work that had been done to grow it. "The weeding and the ploughing, the moving of rocks, all of those things had been done by a man like Mark Wright...It doesn't take very long, two or three years, for it to go back to the way it was. Sadly, the need is still there. The one thing we're not short of is kids. Kids that are disengaged, kids that are sitting on the outside of society."

The story is by no means all sad. "Mark had a very big role in transforming Blacktown," says Om Dhungel, a Bhutanese community leader who sits on the NSW Police Multicultural Advisory Council. "Blacktown Station used to be very scary in some way. Young people standing around; you had to navigate through them so you didn't get pushed. That's all changed."

That period of policing brought other benefits. Wright helped JoJo Tau, whom he says was more important than anyone else to the success of the initiative, to get a job running the Blacktown Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC), a role she holds today. He also found a home at the PCYC for an initiative dreamed up by a young man from South Sudan. Wright had met him at SydWest, and invited him on the Thursday night walks through Westpoint. His name is Mayor Chagai.

Wright had been on the board of the Blacktown-based SydWest Multicultural Services, which delivers services that try to keep young people out of trouble. Blacktown's current chief inspector, Bob Fitzgerald, is chair of SydWest. When the so-called "African gangs" conflict was consuming Melbourne in 2018, Fitzgerald told a News Limited reporter that such a problem was extremely uncommon in Blacktown. "When these things do happen, we find they are carried out by people from a range of backgrounds from Filipinos, Anglos, Islanders ... people from all over the world. We don't have mass gangs roaming the street. You might see groups of Sudanese people, but you'll see people of lots of different cultures hanging together as well."

"I feel that I've let some people down because I wasn't able to sustain these programs," Wright says. But he remains optimistic that others can replicate them elsewhere.

"The concept is simply building relationships, understanding the environment and bringing key people together. At the end of the day, you've just got to talk to people, treat them like people."

I asked him what in his life had motivated him to try the approach he had taken in Blacktown. He said he didn't have a brilliant answer. "You start as a cop jumping fences and chasing crooks, it's exciting, but as you get older you see the best way you can contribute is to lead your team, and to work with a community to prevent bad stuff happening."

He'd had good parents, and had a family of his own -- a wife and three sons -- who were important to him. "I look at kids, whether they're in the dock or on the street, and wonder if you can create a positive environment for them, or be a mentoring role model, or find someone in their community to do that, if they don't have one at home. After that, the ball's in your court, bud."

Over his career, Wright has completed two masters degrees, in public administration and public policy. But he says that nothing he learnt in those courses was more valuable than the two words he first wrote on a yellow Post-it note: Mutual Respect.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun