

Cover

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Man of the Streets

Anton Billings' Unconventional Methods For Steering Kids Away From Gangs Made Him a Hero To Many. But Police Say He Went Too Far.

By Charu Gupta



VALERIA RAY "Rev. Billings came in and it was a blessing."

Decker Street lies just above the Hough neighborhood of Cleveland, one of the roughest places in town. Valeria Ray lives here in a house that looks like most of her neighbors' — cracked siding, a ragged front porch, a bent fence, a tiny patch of landscaping. Ray has lived here since 1993, and almost hugs herself at the thought that she'll finally own the place next year.

Ray is slender and angular; she moves quickly after a full mug of morning coffee. Only her eyes look tired.

Her life has been hard. Pregnant at 15. Two divorces. Many years as a single parent of eight children. Valeria's eldest daughter is now 42, and her youngest, an 18-year-old son, has stayed away from gangs. She has an adorable 1-year-old grandson to care for. She'd consider herself lucky, if not for all the gunfire.

"There's been so many shootings over here," she says, most of it from the gangs who have laid claim to the corners. Last year, shots were fired at her house. In May, two of her sons were shot and injured outside her door.

"It's rough raising kids in this environment," she says.

"Guys on this side of Superior can't cross from 79th on up to St. Clair," she continues. (Decker is one block south of Superior Avenue, and two blocks west of East 79th Street.) "They better not walk up there. They'd better be careful how they ride and go to the stores. It's just not safe for 'em.

"I don't know where all this territorial stuff come up."

She once thought she'd found an answer to her frustrations — or that an answer had found her.

It was a February afternoon in 2005 when Ray found then-34-year-old Anton Billings at her door. Five-foot-nine and thin, Billings wore a suit and hat, and carried a briefcase. He wanted to know if Ray's 18-year-old son was all right. Billings said the boy's name had come up in gang circles at John F. Kennedy High School.

"Rev. Billings came in and it was a blessing," Ray says. "These guys listen to him."

She soon learned that knocking on strange doors was part of Billings' self-appointed mission to save young people from themselves. He'd march into boarded-up drug houses, step into the middle of gang feuds, and bring runaways, prostitutes and beaten women to churches for refuge.

He did all this because he could. As he told those in whose lives he intervened, he'd been a gang member, he'd dealt drugs, he'd done hard time, even missed his mother's funeral because he was in prison.

But the former OG of Cleveland was now the "Reverend Billings," an informal title Billings took on after a spiritual conversion while incarcerated. An inner-city street ministry was underway, and Billings' scope broadened. He fanned out into the city's most violent schools, and with the nod of principals, helped keep the peace. Even the police relied on Billings' contacts.

In 2006, Billings won grants totaling \$50,000 from the Cleveland Foundation and Cuyahoga County Department of Justice for gang outreach. A laptop was purchased; furniture was ordered. Billings started to recruit a team to help him canvass the streets. He was on his way to becoming a professional.

But seven weeks ago it all came to a grinding halt.

On June 6, Billings and four of his team members were arrested outside an elementary school. Billings had crossed the line, screamed a preliminary report by Cleveland police officers who had previously worked with him. There were questions about T-shirts and badges that Billings wore as part of a uniform, and about three juveniles police found waiting in a car under Billings' supervision.

Billings' friends and allies, including school principals and clergy, still speak of the charges in shock and disbelief. Impersonating a police officer? Kidnapping and abduction? It sounds nothing like the man they respect for doing the work no one else would.

LAMONT LOCKHART is deputy chief of RTA police. But in the early '90s he was an East Cleveland undercover narcotics detective, and he met Anton Billings in the streets. "He was a very serious individual," Lockhart recalls. "He was a no-nonsense kinda guy."

Billings' intense persona was in part a product of early initiation into gang life, according to an autobiography he submitted as part of his grant application to the county.

Growing up in California, Billings was surrounded by relatives in the notorious Crips and Bloods gangs. In the late '70s (Billings was born in 1970), he joined the Los Angeles Crips. His street nicknames were "Twon" and "Baby Twon." Even today, Billings goes mainly by Twon.

An unstable family life kept him shuttling between L.A. and Cleveland, where he also had relatives. By the time he was 13, Billings writes in his bio, he had established a Cleveland branch of the Crips. For the next three years, he writes, he got away with "many disrespectful and illegal activities."

The juvenile justice system caught up with Billings at age 16. He served several stints in juvenile correctional facilities, after which he apparently made some efforts to go straight. Billings found roadie work, setting up equipment for local and national recording acts. He also studied Tae Kwon Do, and in 1988 entered and won his seventh and final tournament. At 18, he returned to L.A. to train as a bodyguard.



ANTON BILLINGS "I should not be locked up."

The bio doesn't explain why, but he didn't stay there long. Cleveland police records show that while he was still 18, Billings was suspected of stealing a car at gunpoint. A few months later, according to Cuyahoga County court documents, he was charged with

knowingly receiving a stolen cell phone. A six-month prison sentence was suspended, and Billings was on probation and back on the street.

Just before his 20th birthday, in the summer of 1990, Billings' paternal grandmother let him into his mother's house. Perhaps Billings was lonely, perhaps he was tired and hungry. But Linda Jackson seems to have wanted nothing to do with her son. According to a police report, Jackson asked her son to leave, and when he wouldn't, she called police. He argued and struggled with the officers, and later was charged with assault.

The case was dismissed, but in December 1990, he was found carrying a concealed weapon. The judge reinstated the suspended six-month prison sentence resulting from the stolen cell phone, and added six months' probation for the concealed weapon violation.

Two weeks after his 22nd birthday, Billings was arrested by East Cleveland police and charged with arson, firing a gun into an apartment building and felonious assault. He was found guilty and sentenced to 15 years in state prison. In his biography, Billings writes that the incident was his "irrational response to startling news that a close relative had been assaulted."

By the time he was released in 2004, he was a changed man. He'd found Christ in prison and emerged determined to save as many youths from the streets as he could.

JUST OUT OF PRISON, Billings wore a badly torn jacket and carefully guarded a binder filled with notes on social programs — on attitude and personal responsibility — he'd created in prison. For food, Billings would often rely on the charity of those he helped.

That's how Pastor Leonard Killings, of Advent Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Lee-Harvard neighborhood, recalls meeting Billings — as the ex-con cased the streets in search of converts like a modern-day St. Paul.

"He was a raw professional," Killings says.

Yet Billings impressed Killings with his passion and apparent fearlessness, walking into drug houses and engaging gang members face-to-face. Killings doesn't know how Billings came out of those situations unscathed. The gangs could always say: "You're not gonna get outta here," Killings notes. That's probably why Billings' gear included a bulletproof vest and taser.

"The concern was Rev. Billings putting his life in danger while helping youth in situations where he would not call the police out of concern that youth would be arrested, shot and wounded, or killed," Killings says.

With Killings' help, Billings started making contacts in local government. By the end of 2005, his networking led him to Cuyahoga County Commissioner Peter Lawson Jones, who was looking to expand the county's gang-intervention programs. Leaders of the Lee-

Harvard Ministerial Alliance, school teachers and principals, and Fourth District Commander Roy Rich wrote recommendation letters.

As Billings' work took him inside the school system, he met Anthony Banks, an elder and associate minister at Zion Pentecostal Church of Christ. Banks ran into Billings walking the halls of Jamison Elementary in March. The school was having a rough year: There was a lockdown and no outdoor play activities were allowed. In February, three youths had been shot nearby.

Banks noticed Billings' striking black T-shirt: across the front in gold letters it read, "Cuyahoga County Juvenile Crimes Unit." The word "agent" was printed on the back and both sleeves. In smaller print on the back it read, "Rev. Twon Billings Executive Director."

The two men spoke, and Banks soon joined Billings' cause.

Lieutenant Michael Dodge is a personable guy. He used to write his own stand-up comedy routines, but there's little time for that anymore. Dodge works in Cleveland's fourth police district, where he's in charge of the community service unit.

There was a time, Dodge says, when Billings was an asset to police. "He sometimes supplied information to us," Dodge says. "There was an unofficial relationship."

Dodge says officers would bring in Billings to talk to juveniles they'd arrested because "he could connect with the kids the way we couldn't." Then in late May, Dodge began hearing comments about a T-shirt and badge Billings was wearing. The concern was coming primarily from fourth district police officers: Is there a separate law enforcement agency out there?

So Dodge gave Billings a call to find out more. That's when he learned that Billings was also putting together a "task force." The thought troubled Dodge, and, in late May, he invited Billings to meet with himself and Commander Rich.

Billings brought his uniform T-shirt to the meeting. Dodge says he took one look and told Billings he would be mistaken for law enforcement. His advice: Don't wear it. Dodge says Billings said he understood, but remained noncommittal. The next day, Dodge says, he also warned Billings about the task force plan: "I told him point blank: We applauded what he was doing and told him he risked losing any ground he was gaining by going this route."

Dodge then put his community service unit on alert: Look out for Billings' task force in action.

WITH THE GRANTS received in early 2006, Billings expanded his operation. His task force consisted of Banks and a few other like-minded men: Brian Austin, Garcellius Rembert, John Siggers, Eric Green. Each got a black T-shirt.

According to Green, Billings met the others (except Banks) through Cleveland's club scene; many of them worked as bouncers. Billings didn't ask for references; there was no background check. But Green says Billings did ask him if he'd ever been arrested or convicted of a felony. The answer was yes — four convictions for robbery, receiving stolen property and two drug-related offenses.

Green had his own street ministry of sorts when he met Billings, who once told him: "If we don't step up and try and get a hand on it, all our people gonna wind up back in the system."



CHARMAINE RAY "I refuse to let the system have [Devan]."

So Green started working with Billings in June, in the new "rent-a-dad" program, a service for single moms whose sons needed a positive male influence. The Linda Billings Jackson Re-entry Outreach (named after his mother) tried to create jobs, like yard work, for neighborhood kids.

Charmaine Ray (no relation to Valeria Ray) was a client.

"I refuse to let the system have him," Ray says, referring to Devan, her 14-year-old son. Devan was suspended from Jamison Elementary for getting into a food fight. Then Devan jumped his mother as she tried to discipline a younger son. Ray feared losing her son to the streets; gang fights were not uncommon among Jamison eighth graders, she says. She called Billings, and on the night of June 5, Billings, Green and the others showed up at Devan's door in their black "Juvenile Crimes Unit" T-shirts and fatigue pants.

They decided that Devan needed a reality check about the road he could be traveling. Billings called a juvenile probation officer and asked if he could meet with Devan right away. Green says Rembert put Devan in handcuffs, but Green made Rembert remove them. The men split into two cars, loaded Devan into one and set off.

According to Devan and Green, as they drove, they saw a fight on the street. Billings and his men got out to stop it, and one of the fighters took off running. Green was driving one car and stayed back to help the kid who was hurt. The other car chased the runner. When Green caught up with the rest, he says Rembert had two kids on the ground. Drugs were lying on the curb.

The boy who'd run was 17-year-old Fernell Howard. "I found it," Fernell kept saying. Both kids were looked over, but only Fernell was cuffed and put in the car because he supposedly was the one with the drugs. Billings asked Fernell where he lived and called his grandmother to tell her they were bringing Fernell home.

But before they got to Fernell's, the team ran into Darryll Clayton, another minor. Darryll was hanging out on a corner with two others, and Billings thought things didn't look right. He jumped out and pointed his flashlight. "What ya' doin?" he yelled, and saw Darryll throw something into nearby bushes. Billings ran to Darryll, grabbed him and put him in the car to take him home as well. He picked up a bag of marijuana that he believed Darryll had tossed away.

A Cleveland police cruiser pulled up and officers got out to speak with Billings and Rembert. Then the officers left.

When Billings' team reached Fernell's house, everyone, including Devan, walked to the door. They were greeted by 66-year-old Mamie Howard.

In an interview, Mamie recalls that the men wore badges and bulletproof vests. She says two of them had guns. Devan remembers her asking: "Ya'll police?"

No, she was told. "We're not police officers, we're just a juvenile crime unit," Billings said and showed her the marijuana and Fernell's pocket full of money.

Green then chimed in.

"It's a blessin' for real that we saw you," Green told Fernell. "Had it not been us, and had it been the police officers, you'd be in jail."

They asked and received permission to check Fernell's room — a cursory check, Green says, of places kids might stash things. And they told Mamie that Fernell would be picked up the next morning for community service. Mamie agreed. She even said, "Thank you for bringing him home," according to Devan.

The men gave Mamie a hug and kiss on the cheek before leaving. A similar scene ensued at Darryll's house.

WHEN IT CAME TO STEERING youth away from gangs, Billings and police saw eye to eye; even Lt. Dodge concedes that. Where Billings and police parted was on what to do with the kids once they were found.

According to Dodge, police wanted Billings to leave the street corners alone. But the streets were a fundamental part of Billings' mission and philosophy, says Pastor Killings.

"He was trying to prevent them from committing [criminal] acts, or stop them if they've already started committing those acts," says Killings. "He was trying to help in ways where they would not get arrested for any activity that he witnessed them commit."

With so many young black men already in prison, that was the last place Billings wanted to see more at-risk youths end up. He was willing to do what was necessary to prevent incarceration. The police are limited, Killings says Billings told him and many others. He recalls Billings saying, "If I have to get hurt, if I have to get shot for these kids, if people gonna arrest me," then so be it."

THE DAY AFTER his eventful night with Devan, Billings was to lead a noon assembly for Jamison Elementary students. He wanted Devan, Fernell and Darryll to talk about respect, to be examples for the younger children. Darryll overslept, so only Devan and Fernell were picked up in time to speak. Mamie says Fernell was put into cuffs by whomever picked him up.

Green showed up toward the end of the program, and gave his testimony as well. A little after 2 p.m., the five men and three kids prepared to leave for Audubon Elementary School. Billings' plan was to make sure that, as kids left for the day, there were no after-school disturbances at Audubon. He would then return to Jamison to do the same there.

That's when Green noticed a blue car with "auto repo" painted on its body. Two men were sitting inside, and they followed Billings to Audubon.

According to a police report, the men were Terrance Williams and Ismail J. Abdul Alaa. The report indicates that Williams called fourth district police that day to say he'd recently met "the males" wearing black T-shirts and duty gear with firearms. Williams said that "the males" had told him they were working for County Commissioner Jones.



ERIC GREEN He recalls Billings saying, "If we don't step up, all our people gonna wind up back in the system."

Williams told police that he and Alaa were on their way to meet the males at Audubon. The report does not indicate — and Dodge can't explain — what reasons Williams and Alaa might have had to do so (but Dodge insists they aren't bounty hunters). The phone call ended, and three police officers made their way to Audubon. It was just before 3 p.m.

When they got there, the police report states, Alaa was already talking to some of the guys, including Billings. What happened next is gleaned from Devan and Green's eyewitness accounts, and the police report.

Green says he heard Alaa asking questions about Rembert. "When I see that bitch, I'm gonna beat the fuck outta him," Alaa was telling Billings.

"As long as he has that shirt on, nothing's gonna happen to him," Billings responded.

As police approached in their car, Billings, Austin, Green and Siggers started to walk away from Alaa, the police report states. An officer told them to stop. Everyone except Billings complied.

Alaa shouted to police that Billings was trying to put away a weapon. (Dodge says Billings had his taser on him.) Alaa tackled Billings, and Green saw Alaa throw the first punch. Green, Austin and Siggers ran toward the fight, but two officers told them to stand back.

Rembert was back at the car with the three kids, according to Devan, who adds that Rembert knew Alaa. Rembert had Siggers' gun, and hid it under the seat, according to Devan and the police report.

Police went on to confiscate duty belts, handcuffs, pepper-spray cans, badges, bullet proof vests and a taser they found on the men, and two of Siggers' guns. They also impounded the white Crown Victoria — rigged up with red-and-blue strobe lights, according to police — in which Devan, Fernell and Darryll were waiting.

Dodge arrived on the scene, and a call was made to County Commissioner Jones' office to clear up Jones' connection to Billings (whose badge included the official county logo). The police report says Jones told Dodge that "Billings did not work for the county in any law enforcement capacity and had no arrest authority granted from [Jones]."

So when Dodge was told by police that Fernell and Darryll were saying they had been "arrested" the night before, Dodge ordered all five men arrested. They were charged with burglary (for entering and searching Fernell's room), concealed carry violations, possessing deadly weapons in a public place, kidnapping and impersonating a police officer.

DODGE IS ADAMANT that Billings, however well intentioned, crossed a line.

"[Police are] trained in the protection of your civil liberties," he says. "Our concern for juveniles — it's for their rights. You can't snatch kids off the corner.

"We can take 'em off the street corners, cuff 'em and throw 'em into the back of a police car," Dodge says, leaving out the next stop: jail. When reminded, he adds: "We wanted him to talk to these kids after that."

Billings' supporters argue that it's not so simple.

"Twon would go places where the police won't go," says Anthony Banks, who missed the assembly at Jamison and was not arrested. "He knew how to get to the areas where the situation was thick."

A former Marine, corrections officer and police lieutenant, Banks drives around the Lee-Harvard neighborhood with a sense of urgency. Home ownership is down and rentals are increasing. Teenage girls are getting pregnant in alarming numbers. The allure of gangs is strong.

"You have to understand what some of these kids don't have," he says. "If you don't have good shoes on your feet, or a nice T-shirt — white T-shirt pull-over — and I say to you I'm gonna give you tennis shoes and a good T-shirt, and I feed that to you day after day after day — now I got you in my pocket.

"Now this is what I want you to do: I want you to jump on your bike and sell some drugs for me. And you're gonna make some money. But meanwhile, if you ever get caught, don't worry about it, you know why? 'Cause you a minor. And they just gonna take you to juvie. And your parents gonna come down and get you. And when you call me, I'll come right back, put some more money in your pocket, get you some more shoes, put you in a shirt, get you a hat, make you feel good.

"Next thing you know, that young child is hooked, hooked with that gang and drug system."

Others question whether Billings was easily mistaken for law enforcement.

Billings' arrest was reported in the Plain Dealer and Call & Post, but no one else has come forward to claim they were duped into believing he and his partners were cops. Dodge sees this as evidence that he nipped a problem in the bud, that "we got him the first time he picked up kids."

But Devan points out that the Cleveland cops who stopped Billings and company on June 5 asked some questions, then went on their way.

Suzanne Hawthorne-Clay, the principal at Devan's school who had invited Billings to help her with rowdy behavior, said she liked Billings' consistent appearance. "I required everyone in my school to wear a dress code," she says. "Parents had to wear volunteer badges. And Mr. Billings and his team wore those T-shirts, and no one ever mistook them for police officers."



DEVON RAY One of the last people Billings helped.

Lamont Lockhart, the former East Cleveland undercover detective, says he doesn't know enough to comment on the validity of Billings' arrest. But he has been asking his street sources what they thought about Billings' work. "They'd see him talking to gang members," Lockhart says. But no one he's contacted, Lockhart says, mistook Billings for a cop.

SOME OF THE TROUBLE in June might have been avoided if Rembert had been more forthcoming when Billings asked about his background.

Green says team members found out after their arrest that Rembert had a fake concealed-carry permit and other falsified documents. Rembert, who had given the impression that he was 25 years old, had been given a gun by Siggers. (Siggers owned a private security firm and had a legit permit and a gun and cuffs on his duty belt.) In fact, Rembert was 18, and had been arrested by East Cleveland police in February on identical charges of kidnapping and impersonating a police officer, in addition to robbery and carrying a concealed weapon. Rembert's indictment states that, while in police garb, he forced entry into a home, handcuffed a man and stole his belongings. At the time of Rembert's arrest, police seized items described in legal documents as "police badges," "police uniforms," and a "CPD ID card." Rembert pled not guilty and his trial was scheduled to begin on July 26.

Out on bond after his February arrest, Rembert has remained in jail after the June incident at Audubon on a \$15,000 bond. Green, Siggers and Austin were released without bond (and the case against Siggers has since been dropped). Billings was held under a \$7,500 bond.

Pastor Killings put up the required 10 percent with a bondsman, and Billings' supporters looked forward to his release. But on June 7, a woman walked into the fourth district to press charges against Billings. Lakeisha Gray, 32, suddenly claimed that, since March, Billings had repeatedly threatened her after she refused his advances. (Billings' attorney, Stanley Jackson, claims the woman has a history of making random accusations.) Billings never had a chance to leave jail on the first bond, before police posted a second arrest on June 12. This time, the bond was for \$50,000.

Last week, six weeks after their arrest, a grand jury indicted Billings, Rembert, Green and Austin. Each has been charged with two counts of impersonating a police officer, aggravated robbery and possession of a deadly weapon on school grounds. There are four counts of kidnapping, and one count each of aggravated burglary and carrying a concealed weapon.

The sentence for all the felony counts adds up to a maximum of 84 years in prison.

Billings and Rembert were scheduled to be arraigned on July 25, and were expected to plead not guilty. Arraignments for Green and Austin are scheduled for August 3.

The first pre-trial meeting between Billings' attorney Stanley Jackson and the prosecutor was on July 7, over the Lakeisha Gray incident. But Jackson says they discussed Billings' first case as well. Jackson says the prosecutor had yet to meet with police, but told Jackson that she wanted a psych evaluation of Billings regarding the arrest at Audubon. He seemed "loony" if he was going about impersonating a police officer, Jackson recalls the prosecutor saying.

In numerous collect calls to the Free Times from county jail, Billings has expressed deep bitterness — over the arrest, which prompted the county and Cleveland Foundation to withdraw their grants; over news reports that he believes made him seem dangerous; and over sitting helplessly while his street ministry falls apart.

"I should not be locked up," he says. He's eager to tell his story, but his attorney has advised him not to speak to the media.

JAMISON ELEMENTARY is closed for the summer, and the street where students are picked up after class is dead quiet.

Directly across from Jamison is a condemned two-story house. The first-floor windows are boarded up, the second-floor windows smashed in. Young black men, in long white T-shirts and jeans, walk in and out the front door as though they live there.

Drug house, says Banks, as he sits in his car and takes in the scene. One young man strolls out smoking a thick joint, beer in hand.

Rain comes as a drizzle, then a downpour, before it stops and starts again. But a Jamison fifth-grader keeps pacing the block. Banks recognizes him and calls out.

"Remember Twon Billings?"

"Mm hmm." The boy's eyes dart to the street corner.

"What type of person was he?"

"He was nice." His eyes flash back.

"Why was he nice?"

"Cause he wanted to keep kids outta trouble."

The kid flips open his cell phone and checks it. The irony doesn't escape Banks: The kid is selling dope. "This is the summer, kids are outta school," Banks says. "Where are the programs for them?"

Sandwiched between the elementary school and the boarded-up drug house is a large city law-enforcement sign. "Increased penalty, minimum jail term seven years, for drug activity within 1,000 feet of schools." Then in capital red letters: "Strictly enforced."

Except for the young men walking in and out of the drug house, the street is deserted. The only man of consequence around is Banks.

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