



Zequa Tookes is the new director of Rochester’s Office of Violence Prevention. He was on hand at Monroe High School for a back-to-school giveaway for neighborhood students. PHOTOS BY JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

‘THE WORK IS NEVER DONE’

Rochester’s new violence prevention director focuses on youth mentorship and school outreach programs

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Two days before the start of a new school year, at a resource drive at Monroe High School, Zequa Tookes spotted a familiar face in the crowd of students and families.

“You ready for school?” he called out to a teenage boy, pulling him in for a hug. “How have things been? You got my number still?”

Tookes is not an educator or a coach. He’s the city’s new director of the Office

of Violence Prevention. But he doesn’t want that title to be a barrier between him and the families he was called to serve.

Zequa Tookes wants to be a beacon of light for city youths.

“I think about, there were times where I was growing up here and I didn’t always feel safe,” he said in a recent interview. “I think about – how do I make that 13-year-old version of myself feel safe?”

Tookes has inherited one of the city’s most pressing challenges.

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Royal Reeves, 10, gets a back-to-school haircut from Chaquana Jordan as part of a neighborhood giveaway at Monroe High School. School supplies and sneakers were available for students.

Tookes

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Gun violence is steadily dropping in Rochester, but the city is still clawing its way back to pre-pandemic numbers after a record-high year of shootings and homicides in 2021. Young people are especially vulnerable to the violence. Teenage car thefts exploded last year because of a social media challenge. On several occasions, they've turned deadly.

As director of the Office of Violence Prevention, Tookes will oversee Pathways to Peace – the city's primary anti-violence initiative – but also manage a number of other staff and programs focused on community outreach.

Pathways to Peace transitions to school caseload model of intervention

One of his first priorities was to help better integrate Pathways to Peace into the city school district.

The program has historically acted as a street-level outreach team that responded to violence in schools as needed. This year, Tookes said they're taking a more proactive approach. Nine city schools will have a dedicated Pathways to Peace specialist who works with a caseload of 10 to 15 students identified as "needing support" by school administrators.

Tookes emphasized that these are not necessarily troubled kids, rather students in need of positive mentorship.

The school specialists will help monitor their attendance, make home visits to connect families with resources, advocate on the student's behalf in disciplinary cases and offer peer mediation and provide students with training and mentorship on topics like gang awareness. They will also help coordinate additional support outside of school by the street outreach team where needed.

"We have to look at the way we look at intervention," Tookes said. "It's not just coming at you with rules to follow."

Intervention can also look like a late-night basketball league to keep young people engaged during the hours when violence is most rampant, he said. For six weeks this summer, his office had 50 kids ages 14 to 18 shooting baskets in a city gymnasium. There was nothing particularly profound about the league.



A family finds new sneakers during a school supply giveaway at Monroe High School.

JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

But it kept them out of trouble.

"Those kids, we knew between the hours of 7 to 11 p.m., they're not out there stealing cars," he said. "They're not starting drama on social media. They're not getting involved in any gang activity. They are safe. And those programs, we feel can start to help curb some of what's happening in our city."

Tookes: Violence prevention is a community's work

Similar relationships when Tookes was a kid led him to this work.

He grew up living off Jefferson Avenue in the 1990s, when gun violence in the city was in a peak period. He remembers feeling some sort of unease about the neighborhood in which he grew up but didn't fully see or understand the dangers around him until he was an adult.

Today, he likens that feeling to a life

where you are constantly on guard, having to be aware of your surroundings. The city is rich in resources and things to do, but Tookes acknowledged that even the threat of violence on your way to those activities can be a barrier for some.

His guiding principle? How do you create dynamics where the whole community can feel safe?

A football coach and a high school global studies teacher kept him on the right path, checking in on him at home and showing him the "world was so much bigger than what I was thinking."

It enabled him to pursue his first job, a gig in a city recreation center. From there, Tookes spent the last decade zeroed in on youth development through positions with the Center for Youth, Hillside, Villa Hope and Monroe County.

In this role, he wants to tackle violence prevention as a public health issue, understanding from his own life

that small actions can have serious impact.

He compared gun violence to a sickness like COVID-19. Encouraging people to simply wash their hands, while a vaccine was in development, helped slow and stop the spread of the virus. Encouraging people to speak out and hold each other accountable could lead to a bigger outcome than Tookes' attempts to quell violence alone.

"It's about looking violence in the face, understanding that we don't have all the answers yet, but that it takes a community," he said. "The work is never done."

– Kayla Canne covers community safety for the Democrat and Chronicle, with a focus on police accountability, government surveillance and how individuals are impacted by violence. Follow her on Twitter @kaylacanne and @bykaylacanne on Instagram. Get in touch at kcanne@gannett.com.