Green Dot: How We’re Stopping Violence

By: Corporal Matt Stern

When on-duty as a police officer, it’s obvious to me that when I see something that doesn’t look right—or that may lead to something harmful—it is my duty to investigate. There’s rarely any harm in me checking the safety of two couples arguing, speaking to someone fearfully hustling down the street, or encouraging a person to get to safety who’s consumed a bit too much alcohol. I do these things without reservation or hesitation and not because it’s my job, but because it’s the right thing to do and because I care.

Off-duty, however, it gets trickier for me. Even though I still care I’m vulnerable and have barriers. I lack the same capabilities and perceived authority in civilian clothes as I would in uniform. I also don’t want to be embarrassed when I’m wrong, and this is especially the case if my actions involve my friends or family. I’m sure you’ve experienced this too. You’re a good person who always wants to do what’s right, but every once in a while when you’ve noticed something wrong there was something inside you keeping you silent, even when your gut is telling you to speak up. It doesn’t make us morally deficient... it just makes us human.

Most people agree that a good norm for our community is that violence will not be tolerated. Yet, every time we receive a Clery Act alert on our phones we’re reminded about the violence in our communities and places of work, and how it impacts all demographics of people. Violence continues despite most of us having a friend, family member or loved one who has been, or is currently being effected, by violence. It’s confusing because if so many people are against violence, then why is violence continuing?

What if you could step in and change incidences of violence in our community starting today? Would you do it knowing that a few of your seconds could save another person from experiencing something so painful that they carry it for a lifetime?

I was inspired to write this article by Gretchen, a UCSB student, who a few weeks ago visited a booth on campus announcing a revolutionary bystander intervention program called “Green Dot.” Gretchen (photo middle) took the Green Dot Bystander pledge promising to be the type of person who will DO SOMETHING to decrease the likelihood that something bad will happen or get worse when she sees it. Gretchen has committed to step in as a bystander because as she said it: “I’d rather be wrong than miss an opportunity to prevent violence.” Not only does Gretchen have the right perspective but she is both bold and courageous. She recognizes that even those who have nothing to do with creating violence have a role to play and can make a huge impact that lasts a lifetime for others. In other words the stakes are too high to not take steps to reduce potential violence when we see it.

Think about how you’ve reacted when hearing your neighbors arguing. Did you call the police or knock on their door? Most people don’t want to feel like a “snitch” or want to be in a position to get involved in something...
that is “not my business.” It’s also not an easy thing for some of us to risk friendships or “make a scene” if we’re shy. I know because I’ve experienced these barriers myself!

The trick is to find a way around your personal barriers. You may not feel comfortable calling the police when you hear your neighbors yelling but how about speaking with another neighbor who would be willing to call the police. Another option could be to sidestep face to face confrontation by calling your neighbor’s cellular phones to check in and ask if they’re okay. We have to do something.

The point I’m making is that we’ve agreed violence should not tolerated but we have yet to figure out how to get everyone to do their part to end violence. It needs to be engrained in our culture that no one person has to do everything but EVERYONE MUST DO SOMETHING. This is why Gretchen’s stance on being a bystander is so important for us to emulate because she is willing to DO SOMETHING even at the risk of being wrong. We all have power as a bystander and even with our barriers (we all have them) we can make a huge impact the same way I know Gretchen is prepared to do right now.

As a police officer I have responded to nearly every type of violent call and I’ve worked hard at finding ways to reduce violence in our community. In my experience, Green Dot is the most promising program I’ve seen to reduce incidents of personal violence as it helps everyone become more capable of doing something to step in when they see high risk behaviors. Just imagine how many people are in a position every day at UCSB who could prevent violence from happening. Think of how many people are out there in the world who could preventing violence towards your friends, family, and loved ones.

UCSB is in the beginning stages of rolling out Green Dot and now is a good time for you to reconsider your role in violence prevention. I know you’re already contributing by not participating in violence, but consider what Green Dot has to offer you and UCSB. It is unlike any program you’ve ever participated in because it’s about developing actionable solutions that allow people to follow their own impulses and intervene when they see someone in harm’s way. It’s also about being proactive at communicating to others that violence is not okay and that they’re expected to help keep our community safe. For me it’s about ending violence.

Join me and learn more about Green Dot at UCSB by visiting https://www.facebook.com/GauchoGreenDot/

For information on how to get involved with Green Dot or to receive Green Dot training, email me at matt.stern@police.ucsb.edu or Lauren Gunther, Prevention Educator, CARE at lauren.guther@sa.ucsb.edu.