

Editorial: Armando Olivares has critical message for Springfield children: Stop the violence



By **The Republican Editorials**

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Springfield's Armando Olivares is emerging as an unlikely leader.

At the age of 17, Olivares was arrested and charged in the November 2010 fatal shooting of Reality Shabazz Walker. He, along with three others charged in that murder, were acquitted.

Today, at 20, he works for the Latino Chamber of Commerce and as a mentor for Project Coach.

On Thursday, he spoke passionately about love – of his family, of the neighborhood, of Springfield residents as a family -- at a meeting he hosted at **Chestnut Middle School**. Standing before a group of 150 children and adults, more than half under the age of 25, he delivered a strong, unequivocal and impassioned plea to those before him to stop the violence.

(Listen to Olivares' speech in the audio file embedded at the end of this editorial.)

"Nine gunshot victims, four murders, two weeks." He chanted repeatedly. After a spoken and silent prayer, he played Puff Daddy's "I'll Be Missing You." He told the group he is tired of hearing that song, which is commonly played at funerals of urban youth.

In addition to inviting other impassioned speakers to share their stories of turning away from lives of crime to become productive leaders, he called for anyone in the audience to name both problems and propose solutions that might help solve the problems children face in the streets of Springfield.

"In my opinion, it's really not about anyone in this room right now but the children. It's not about any of us. It's about the children playing in our parks. It's about those stray bullets passing our children in those parks. It's about kids having to take the initiative to save kids."

And the children spoke: The first, a 10-year-old boy, said a friend of his witnessed a recent shooting. When Olivares asked him for his solution, the boy said, more police officers on the street. The crowd applauded loudly.

Others proposed jobs programs, arts funding for schools, named existing after-school programs that are available for city youth.

Olivares promised to follow up, to meet again and to act in concert with those who came, in a movement he's calling **One Springfield: Youth Stand Up**.

Olivares has set a high bar and a positive message for himself and for the youth who heard him. The last word goes to him.

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"Let's make the 11:00 news for productive actions, and let's not make the 11:00 news when someone dies, when someone kills or when someone gets busted by the police. Let's be known and recognized for something our parents can be proud of. It's time we stop the hate and unite as one. As one we will be heard. As one we have to be understood. And as one, we will be respected."

Following are excerpts from Armando Olivares' speech:

Me as a 20-year-old man in Springfield, I am not going to tolerate my niece to be scared to go to a city park.

Me as a 20-year-old in Springfield am not going to tolerate my mother to be scared to go out and eat to stop at the gas station without my company, without my father's company. That's unacceptable.

My mission for today is to speak as a family, as a community, about ways we can impact our city positively and productively.

Young people are Springfield. We are Springfield. Let's be recognized and respected and appreciated as a whole for taking on this initiative and remaining consistent with our love and respect for our city. Let's make the 11:00 news for productive actions and let's not make the 11:00 news when someone dies, when someone kills or when someone gets busted by police.

Let's be known and recognized for something our parents can be proud of. Let's care and love before it's too late because in my life experiences, I've seen some people tend to care and love when someone passes or when something happens and that must change.

Love today. Care today for a better tomorrow.

If it's broken, let's fix it Springfield. If it's wrong, let's make it right, Springfield.

Are we going to sit and watch the news nervously when a homicide is mentioned curious about who died now? Are they my friend? Is it my cousin? Is it my uncle? Who has died now? Because our streets just aren't safe. Are we going to continue to avoid certain parks or recreational areas due to high crime? It's time. It's time us young people stand up as one. It's time us young people support and acknowledge one another. It's time we stop the hate and unite as one. As one we will be heard. As one we have to be understood. And as one, we will be respected.

In my opinion it's really not about anyone in this room right now but the children. It's not about any of us. It's about the children playing in our parks. It's about those stray bullets passing our children in those parks. It's about kids having to take the initiative to save kids from kids.

Negativity attaches and so does positivity. Surround yourself by people who influence who you want to be in life.

Springfield needs more youth empowerment programs.

From young people to young people we can be a force in the development of our community. We need more to do and we will move forward with developing more to do together. Having too much time on your hands is a recipe for disaster in most cases.

Let's come together and make wise decisions together. Let's not be blind to the fact that small decisions can have enormous impact on everyone's life. A decision so small can cost you your freedom. A decision so small can cost you your life or a child's life.

Young people let's stand up together. Let's love each other. Let's acknowledge each other. Let's support each other because each and every one in this room to make it whatever they want to make it in life.

Let's put more love and more heart into loving and respecting where we live. How can we shoot in front of our houses? How can we bring issues to our home where we have nieces, where we have kids, where we have our grandparents, where in what mind does that make any sense?

Share our love for our city. Let's share our love for our city. And let's begin a movement that will consistently impact the city of Springfield positively. This movement will not die. And if at the end of this movement, I stand alone, I will be a one-man movement. If I believe in this movement, and I certainly believe in my city, small steps climb mountains.

Your presence here today is a step further in reaching the top of the mountain.

Our children need this movement. Our children cannot continue to mistake gunfire for fireworks. That cannot continue to happen. And we will not tolerate that in the city, as citizens in the city of Springfield.

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