

Heart of Gold

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Dr. Peter Gold (SLA '12, M '16) and his closest friends from Tulane are building a 'Strong City' to stop the violence. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

It was still dark in the early morning hours of Nov. 20, 2015, when fourth-year medical student Peter Gold was driving down Magazine Street and noticed something clearly wasn't right.

At 4 a.m., the street was desolate except for two figures stumbling in the distance. A woman struggled under the arms of a man whose face was cloaked by a hooded sweatshirt. Her legs flailed as he dragged her forward onto the sidewalk toward a nearby vehicle.

Gold slowly backed his car up to get a better look and made a split-second decision.

“You don’t think,” he said. “You’re in that situation, and it’s an immediate fight-or-flight response. Somebody had to do something, and I was there.”

Gold sped toward the two, dashed out of his car and confronted the assailant, who released his grip on the woman. At that moment it became clear. The man had a gun.

What happened next would make headlines around the world. When Gold approached the man, he ended up getting shot in the stomach. It may have been luck, a miracle or the invisible hand of fate but when the gunman tried to fire again, his weapon refused. It jammed at least three times before the man gave up and drove away, leaving both Gold and the woman on the sidewalk.

“I didn’t black out or pass out,” Gold said. “I remember everything.”

A nearby surveillance camera did too, capturing high-definition footage of the whole incident. The good Samaritan medical student from Tulane became an international hero.

LAUNCH OF STRONG CITY FOUNDATION

Now graduated from medical school and fully recovered, Gold isn’t finished being a hero. Except he wants to save an unlikely target: men like Euric Cain, the 22-year-old who shot him.

Gold, 27, has launched a foundation with eight of his closest friends from Tulane to end cycles of violence within communities, starting with New Orleans. Their nonprofit, Strong City, will support community-based organizations that empower underserved youth so that none will ever follow in Cain’s footsteps. Their goal—through money, time and building a network of skilled professionals—is to provide these organizations the resources they need to help kids reach their full potential.

“I want to change the conversation from being about my recovering to about how we can all come together to look at the bigger picture,” Gold said. “Let’s solve this problem by focusing at the root and working with the youth in our communities.”

Gold launched the Strong City foundation with a media blitz in early April. He sat down for an exclusive, high-profile live interview on the “TODAY” show with Matt Lauer. Segments on “NBC Nightly News,” “Inside Edition,” People.com and other

media outlets quickly followed.

“The response has been phenomenal,” Gold said.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

The group raised \$20,000 in donations within two weeks. Strong City’s first community partner is the New Orleans-based Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), which engages underserved young people through community-based education, mentoring and employment readiness programs to help them develop their skills and strengthen their ties to family and community.

“Through the creation of Strong City, Peter is showing us all that by coming together to support community-based organizations working with underserved youth that we can address underlying causes of violence in our communities and make our cities healthier, safer and stronger for everyone,” said Melissa Sawyer, YEP executive director and co-founder.

The idea for Strong City came about while Gold was recovering in the hospital, thinking about what happened the night he was shot and what events in life lead people to violence. Yes, he was angry, but the question that haunted him the most was how could another human being do this? How can life wear down a person’s humanity to such degree that they can kill a stranger?

“I think as a society we have failed people,” Gold said. “I think that if (Cain) was given the opportunity to be successful when he was younger, that maybe this would never have happened.

What he did was horrendous, and I’m not saying that it’s OK. But what I am saying is that I think there is a bigger picture here.”

Cain was arrested three days after Gold’s shooting and later pled guilty to that crime and others. He is serving a 54-year prison sentence.

Gold is convinced that tackling violence has to start at its roots. He believes that programs that provide children with safe spaces to feel supported and nurtured will help them learn healthy coping and conflict resolution skills. YEP offers mentoring, tutoring, job-training programs, outreach for those within the juvenile justice system and recreational programs.

“If we could come up with our idea of what would be an awesome community-based program and what it would look like, the Youth Empowerment Project would be it,” Gold said. “They have after-school programs with young kids starting at ages 5 and 6. They give them a safe place to come after school and hang out with other kids. They get help with their homework, get their school uniforms washed and just the basic things that they need to be successful.”

RESPECT FOR LIFE

Gold now lives in New York and is completing his first year as a resident in orthopedic surgery at North Shore University and Long Island Jewish Medical Center in Long Island. As for any lasting effects from his injuries, he’s “110 percent.”

“Except for the scar down my stomach, it has no effect on me day to day, which is an absolute miracle and attributable to University Medical Center, the Tulane trauma team and Dr. Meg Moore, who was my physician,” he said. “I’m so fortunate that she was there that night to take care of me.”

The crime also hasn’t shaken his faith in New Orleans. Gold’s connection to the city and Tulane are deep. His parents, Gail Hahn Gold (NC ’80) and Dr. Robert Gold (A&S ’78, M ’82), met at the university as undergrads. His sister, Lisa Gold Dresner (B ’08, ’09), and her husband, Jason Dresner (B ’08), also graduated from Tulane.

“New Orleans is a special, amazing place. This city made me who I am and how I think,” Gold said. “Tulane and New Orleans are something we always think about. It will always be our second home.”

While any physical wounds are healed, the incident has shaped Gold in other ways. His time in the hospital has changed how he interacts with his own patients. He has a much deeper empathy for what they are going through.

“I understand what it’s like to be on the other side, sitting in that hospital bed, kind of hopeless, sick and scared—not knowing if I’m going to be OK,” he said. “To have someone like Dr. Moore, who as a surgeon has so much confidence and knowledge, come in to talk to me and help me and my family stay calm and stay on the right path to recovery. It made all of the difference. She is an amazing woman. I hope that as I become a surgeon that I can do the same thing for my patients.”

Gold said the trauma of his experience still hits him at unexpected times.

“When it comes up the most is when I see other people helping somebody else out. I become a little bit more emotional than I was before. If I see a movie where someone is saving someone or someone is helping someone out, I’ll get a little teary-eyed.”

Gold said that when he goes for a run and gets a surge of energy and the euphoria that goes along with exercising, he’s happy to be alive. “I can run. I can feel good. That’s how it comes back to me. Just respecting life and thinking about important relationships that I have with my family or my friends. It is amazing how blessed I am. We all are—to have these relationships and be happy together and live on this earth. It should not be taken for granted.”

That respect for life—all life—is a message he hopes Strong City drives home.

“I want people to know that we’re not alone in this world. If we all come together as a group, as a strong collective, we can make the world around us a better place,” he said. “If you feel the same way, let’s do that together.”

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