

BRIAN MCGRORY

One on one with Rivers

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The navy blue BMW glided up to the litter-strewn curb yesterday, and out stepped the Rev. Eugene F. Rivers, already talking, already laughing, before his suede shoes even hit the ground.

“My man,” he yelled to a passing car.

He is flanked by three guys who, in turn, are surrounded by a Dorchester streetscape that includes a paraphernalia shop, a pest control company, and an auto repair garage.

Rivers has come to show precisely how he's going to save the city from itself amid the kind of bloodshed that Boston hasn't seen in years.

It doesn't take long to get him going. Actually, it takes about 20 seconds.

“We've got 30-year-old pregnant grandmothers hanging on street corners with their daughters and grandsons,” Rivers fumed. “No one asks: ‘Why? What is going on in the black community that they can't control their children and manage them?’ And why is it inappropriate to ask that question?”

“Move this conversation back to where it needs to be,” he said. “Get beyond the stupid, café latte liberal dumbness and get to the important question: If you can't take control of the children of your community, then how are you a leader?”

These kinds of harangues, though quietly echoed in City Hall and on Beacon Hill, infuriate black and liberal politicians, many of whom would like to dismiss Rivers out of hand, to say he doesn't speak for the community, to send him permanently to the margins.

But their problem is this: Gene Rivers is effective, and, beyond the bluster, he cares.

More than a decade ago, he joined with the Rev. Bruce Wall and the Rev. Ray Hammond, two talented men, to create the so-called 10-point plan that turned into a national model for stemming urban violence.

Since then, he's held vigil at the bedsides of shooting victims, posted bail for suspects he believed were good guys, dragged countless kids off the streets. On Sunday, he publicly called on black businessmen and politicians to fund a program that would pay ex-cons to be youth workers.

On this day, he has met me in Dorchester to show me another part of his vision: an empty storefront that he hopes to turn into a thriving boxing league.

“The ring is on its way, and this is where it goes,” he says, standing in the bay window. Already, three Everlast punching bags sit in boxes on the floor.

“Kids think they're tough? I've got some 18-ounce gloves and mouthpieces and headgear,” he said. “Let's see how tough you are. You've got anger management issues? Get it out right here. They've been doing this in white neighborhoods forever.”

Rivers walks around the corner and announces, “This is where the computer lab will go.” He smiles and adds, “We'll use boxing to take kids from guns to books.”

In the basement, he envisions a recording studio and video arcade; at the front door, a metal detector. “The place will be lit up like Times Square,” he said.

How will he pay for it? “I'm out there with a tin cup,” he replied. “We need about seven of these all over town.”

How does he know kids will come?

To answer that last question, he drove me two blocks up Washington Street, where he pushed open the basement door of the Baker House, a haven that he founded.

A cluster of young boys, each maybe 12 years old, was gathered around a pool table.

A few feet away, a half-dozen teens were playing video games. In a backroom, a beefy guy belted out a song in a recording studio.

We climbed the stairs, to the computer lab, the chapel, some meeting rooms -- kids here, kids there, an executive director picking at a salad for lunch.

“The kids will go anywhere that will take them,” he finally said.

Gene Rivers might be obnoxious. He might be a little bit crazy. But these are obnoxious, crazy times, and maybe he's exactly what this city needs.

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