



LIGHTER TOUCH: Kennedy in Hempstead, N.Y.

# Always on My Mind

David Kennedy's obsession with drug dealers has made him a highly sought-after criminologist.

By SUZANNE SMALLEY

**T**HE IMAGE OF A DRUG DEALER driving a Mercedes is a Hollywood favorite, so maybe it's not surprising that the African-American preacher, speaking on a panel about how to shut down urban drug markets, went for the cliché. It's hard to get the dealers off the corners and into straight jobs, said the preacher, since selling drugs pays so well. A voice piped up. "This is not true," said David Kennedy. "They're scraping by, living at home." Kennedy offered advice: when confronting dealers who say they're getting rich, tell them, "I'm calling bulls---."

Kennedy is a rail-thin white man with weary eyes, a goatee and hair down his back; he resembles country singer Willie Nelson. He has never been a cop, and, as one friend says, he "looks more like a biker than a professor." He has no Ph.D. or masters in criminology; he studied philosophy as a Swarthmore undergrad. But in the hotel ballroom packed with police and U.S. Justice Department officials, everyone was listening—because Kennedy is the only person who has ever come up with a consistently viable (and cost-effective) strategy for helping the inner city with its chronic blight and shame, the dope dealer on the corner.

Kennedy's classroom has been the street.

As a researcher for Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, he spent years in the rough neighborhoods of cities like Houston, Los Angeles and Boston. He watched the same sad pattern: locked and loaded, cops would repeatedly kick down doors—or make undercover buys to catch dealers. The locals began viewing the police the way residents of Tikrit saw the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division in the summer of 2003: as an occupying army. Very few of these residents were dealers and even fewer were violent, but many people subscribed to the "don't snitch" ethos that made it difficult for the cops to make cases.

In a 2004 experiment in High Point, N.C., Kennedy got the cops to try a new way of cleaning up the corners. They rounded up some young dealers; showed a videotape of them dealing drugs; and readied cases, set for indictment, that would have meant hard time in prison. Then they let the kids go. Working with their families, the police helped the dope dealers find job training and mentors. The message, which spread quickly through the neighborhood, was that the cops would give kids a second chance—but come down aggressively if they didn't take it. The police won back trust they had lost long ago (if they ever had it). After four years, police in High Point had wiped the drug dealers off the corner. They compared the numbers to the prior

four years and found a 57 percent drop in violent crime in the targeted area.

"We've been in this cycle in which law enforcement pushed harder and harder and harder, which drives the community further and further away," Kennedy tells *NEWSWEEK*. "That creates additional space for the relatively few bad guys to operate, which makes law enforcement push harder and makes the community step further back. We're in this spiral of decline, and the great revelation of the High Point work was that we can consciously step out of that spiral and, in fact, reverse it." Kennedy's research shows that shockingly small numbers of people—dozens, not hundreds—cause the violence plaguing cities' worst areas. Most people just want a safe place to live, but feel anger toward heavy-handed police. The most effective cops are not the ones who make buy-busts, but who can find a dealer, show him photos of him committing a crime and give him a genuine choice: get straight or go to jail.

Cops were initially wary of Kennedy's methods, which some mocked as "hug-a-thug." But Kennedy is much in demand now. Police in more than 30 cities have received his training (thanks mostly to Justice Department funding); his tactics are being adopted by police departments from Atlanta to Seattle, with some spectacular results. One crime-infested Nashville neighborhood where Kennedy's program was used saw a 91 percent drop in crime and prostitution in 2008, largely attributable to Kennedy's good-cop, bad-cop approach.

The hippieish Kennedy surprises some police with his ability to relate to black and Hispanic gangbangers. He grew up in a privileged Detroit suburb and was working in L.A. when crack hit in the 1980s; today he seems fearless about wandering in dicey areas. His basic interviewing technique is to listen intently to criminals. Now 50, he is a professor at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where he is left alone to do field work. His longtime friend criminologist Mark A.R. Kleiman claims that Kennedy is just smarter than everyone else in the room. "He has a million brilliant ideas," says Kleiman, who recalls Kennedy obsessively brainstorming about how to kill urban drug markets as a low-level researcher at Harvard 15 years ago. "He invented caffeinated beer before they did. He was going to call it Whipsaw, with the slogan, 'Friends don't let friends go to sleep drunk.'" Kennedy just "fell into crime," says Kleiman. Good thing for High Point and other troubled inner cities across the country. ■