

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

From the streets to second chances: How Roca is changing the lives of Baltimore's young men

Darreonna Davis

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Roca youth worker John Young, center, and member Lamontae Royster serve hot dogs to Baltimore Police officers Dennis Gillespie and Stephanie Uruchima at Roca's National Night Out cookout on August 5 outside the Waxter Center in Baltimore. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)

The rain came in sheets on a Friday afternoon, drumming against the windshield of a silver Subaru. Inside, John Young is behind

the steering wheel, and John “Yahya” Lewis is making phone calls to some of the young men on his roster.

The men were layered in Roca gear: both in Roca caps with Lewis wearing a branded T-shirt, windbreaker and jeans, and Young in a hoodie and sweats. They are dressed comfortably to hit the streets of Baltimore City and county to check on at least four or five of the young men in their more than 20-person caseload.

It’s not glamorous work, with some staffers getting the runaround from program participants. But that isn’t great enough to match their “relentlessness,” Young explained.

“We have to go to their home; they’re not there. We have to go to their job if they’re working; they’re not there. We have to go to their school; they’re not there. We have to go to their girlfriend’s house; they’re not there. We have to go to the blocks and stuff where they frequent; they’re not there,” Young said. “It’s an unrelenting mission to find these guys.”

This is the work of Roca, a nationally recognized organization with a mission to disrupt and prevent violence among the young men most at risk of being shot or pulling the trigger themselves. The first step isn’t therapy, job training or even talking. It’s showing up — over and over again.

For Young and Lewis, being staffers at Roca Baltimore means logging miles across the area in the rain, in the cold, in the heat, to connect with the young men they serve.

Roca’s roots began with a Baltimore native

Molly Baldwin, the founder and CEO of Roca, started working with youths in Baltimore when she was 16 years old. After relocating to Massachusetts for college, the native Baltimorean planted roots there after graduation and continued working with young people. She then founded Roca in 1988.



Roca founder and CEO Molly Baldwin. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)

Over 35 years later, Roca has expanded across Massachusetts, to Hartford, Connecticut, and Baldwin's hometown of Baltimore. Her work with Roca, which she describes as a privilege and a calling, has led to awards and recognition from many across the country and abroad.

One of her most memorable moments came in December 2022, when Prince William and Princess Catherine of Wales visited Roca's original office in Chelsea, Massachusetts, during a three-day Boston tour focused on climate and community initiatives.

The royals spent time meeting staff and listening to the stories of young men and young mothers in the program. Baldwin described them as “smart, gracious, kind and respectful” — and said the visit brought invaluable exposure for Roca.

“It was a big gift for Roca and for the community,” Baldwin said.

Baldwin, well aware of her hometown’s struggles, began working in the early 2010s to bring her Massachusetts program to Baltimore.

“The safety issues in Baltimore? Horrific and heartbreaking and completely unacceptable,” Baldwin said. “The murder rate is through the roof, and everyone just sort of says, ‘that’s just the way it is.’”



Britain's Prince William and Kate, Princess of Wales, tour the Roca offices in Chelsea, Mass., with founder Molly Baldwin, left, and Chelsea police captain Dave Batchelor in 2022. (Reba Saldanha/Press Pool)

Over the years, Baldwin said she met with nearly 200 people to figure out how to bring Roca to Baltimore. Among them was the then-chair of the public safety committee, former city councilman and current Mayor Brandon Scott.

Scott drove Baldwin through neighborhoods including Cherry Hill, Park Heights, and West Baltimore to show her the communities Roca would serve. Convinced the program could strengthen the city's violence prevention efforts, Baldwin secured a \$4 million, four-year funding commitment from then-Mayor Catherine Pugh's administration, according to a Roca spokesperson.

"There are organizations across the country that do parts of what Roca does, but this kind of comprehensive intervention — stay at it for a few years, high use of data, high supervision — is just different, and we think that's what moves the needle," Baldwin said.

And moving the needle, they are. Since arriving in the summer of 2018, Roca has become a key player in the city's broader public health approach to violence.

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As a council member, Scott championed a law that [required mayors to develop a comprehensive crime reduction plan](#). The law passed in May 2020 and, by December, Scott was elected mayor and the first to implement the plan.

Baltimore's first [Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan](#) launched in 2021 and aimed to cut homicides and nonfatal shootings by 15% each year using a community-based, data-informed strategy. In 2021, there were 726 nonfatal shootings and 344 homicides in Baltimore.

In 2022, the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE) headed the city's [Group Violence Reduction Strategy](#), or GVRS, a partnership between the Baltimore Police Department and the State's Attorney's Office. Roca became one of two community providers. That year, Baltimore had 689 nonfatal shootings and 336 homicides.

By April 2024, the city's four GVRS districts — Western, Southwestern, Central and Eastern — had already seen a 24% year-over-year drop in shootings. Baltimore ended 2024 with around [200](#) homicides, the lowest figure in nearly a decade.

In July, officials announced the flagship program would expand to the [Southern District](#). As of August, the city is on track for continued declines, with 86 homicides and 209 nonfatal shootings so far.

“That has always been the case that much more people in Baltimore want to be healthy, want to be alive, want to thrive, than want to be involved in activities and things that get them on the wrong side of the law, or worse,” Scott said. “We are doing something that, one, people said we could never do, and we’re doing it in a way that people say it would never work.”

And Roca has helped with that.

Since the 2022 launch of the gun violence strategy, MONSE has referred 70 participants to Roca, said Stefanie Mavronis, the director of MONSE. Of those, Mavronis said 93% have not been

revictimized and 98% have not been rearrested or charged with another violent offense.

“They’re very embedded on the front end of how we’re identifying the people, how we’re finding them and how we’re delivering that message that’s going to resonate with them and, hopefully, get them to a place where they’re willing to step away from whatever they’ve been involved in and work with us to change their lives,” Mavronis said.

Roca’s time in Maryland hasn’t come without challenges. In December 2022, amid contract negotiations, Roca was [excluded](#) from weekly coordination meetings and from receiving further referrals. MONSE officials said Roca missed less than a month’s worth of coordination meetings.

“The work of violence prevention is too challenging to spend time looking three years in the rearview mirror,” said Kurtis Palermo, the executive vice president of Roca Maryland. “The fact is that our relationship with Mayor Scott and his administration has never been stronger. We look forward to growing our partnership further in pursuit of our shared goals of continuing to reduce gun violence and save lives.”

Roca hosted an outing on Aug. 5 for [National Night Out](#), an annual event that connects communities with local law enforcement.



Roca community members host a cookout for National Night Out outside the Waxter Center in Baltimore earlier this month. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)



Antoin "Twan" Torain, center, plays a peg board game with other Roca staff members during National Night Out. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)



Roca participant Trey Jones, right, greets staff member Sheldon Smith-Gray while they volunteer at Roca's cookout. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)

Booths lined the parking lot of the Waxter Center for Senior Citizens, a block away from Roca Baltimore's headquarters. About 50 people filled the lot throughout the day to get Italian ice, popcorn, backpacks, Roca-embroidered visors and tote bags, drinks and food.

Lewis and Young grilled burgers and hot dogs. Some Roca participants helped set up the booths and served plates piled with the freshly cooked food and coleslaw.

Rydell Davis, 60, a member of the Waxter Center, said he's seen Roca participants cleaning up trash in Mount Vernon and believes they're getting the guidance and space to contribute positively to the community.

"It gives them a sense of direction, job opportunities," Davis said.



Rydell Davis, volunteer at the Waxter Center, pauses while sweeping up. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)

How the city pinpoints who needs help

Every Wednesday, about 50 people — homicide detectives, school resource officers, federal partners and prosecutors from both the state's attorney and attorney general's offices — fill Baltimore Police headquarters. They are all there for one purpose: to review every shooting and killing from the past week and figure out who might be next.

Attendees identify the victims' close associates and people at risk of retaliation or escalation. From there, the Police Department's Group Violence Outreach Team digs deeper: Who's influential in the group? Who could retaliate? Who could ask someone to retaliate on their behalf?

Every Thursday, the Group Violence Outreach Team attends a coordination meeting with MONSE and the city's two primary intervention partners, Roca and the Youth Advocate Program. That's where referrals are officially made, and the outreach begins.

Col. Robert Velte, who oversees the GVRS within the Baltimore Police Department, said Roca's deep commitment sets them apart and gives them credibility on the street.

"People are getting job training. People are getting life coaching. All these things you need to legitimately be moved out of the game and reduce your chances of being shot, incarcerated or, God forbid, killed," said Velte, who heads the department's Crime Strategies and Intelligence Division.

Roca also receives referrals from hospitals, public defenders, judges and state's attorneys. Hospitals contact Roca after treating nonfatal shooting victims, while legal officials may recommend it as part of a plea deal or alternative to jail for young men at a crossroads.

'Rewire their brain'

Roca Baltimore works with young men ages 16 to 24 and, as of 2022, has expanded its reach to other parts of Maryland. Young manages a caseload of 21 young men, including a participant named Dajuan, whose last name is being withheld to protect his privacy.

Now 26, Dajuan joined Roca Baltimore in 2021 after surviving two gunshot wounds to the head. Before that, he said, he didn't know how to manage his emotions.

“I’ll shut down. I’ll start cussing,” Dajuan said, “but then I had to realize I gotta open up to people. That’s the only way. I’m going to have to break this barrier down.”



Roca youth workers John “Yahya” Lewis, right, and John Young greet Dajuan during a home visit. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)

With help from Roca’s cognitive behavioral therapy model — and support from Young, whom he was paired with — Dajuan said he’s learned to control his emotions and become a more present father to his two daughters.

“When I first got to the program, his emotional regulation was horrible. He used to throw temper tantrums. He couldn’t handle anything,” Young said.

The two spent six months working together on CBT skills designed to help Dajuan understand the connection between his thoughts, feelings and actions. Those seven core skills are: Act on

your values, be present, flex your thinking, label your feelings, solve it and stick with it.

“All of the CBT skills give you a sense of life and how you’re supposed to go about it,” Dajuan said.

That approach is what sets Roca apart, Palermo said. The organization’s model of working with high-risk young people for 18 to 24 months is grounded in brain science.

“If you can’t offer them a way to literally change the way they’re thinking and rewire their brain, especially with criminal thinking, being in harm’s way, you’re only doing enough to keep them safe while they’re with you,” Palermo said.

Joseph B. Richardson Jr., a professor at the University of Maryland and co-director of the school’s gun violence research initiative, [PROGRESS](#) — Prevent Gun Violence: Research, Empowerment, Strategies & Solutions — said he’s been impressed with Roca’s relentlessness and persistence in engaging high-risk youths. But although cognitive behavioral therapy can change the way someone thinks, it is not a replacement for other forms of therapy, Richardson said.

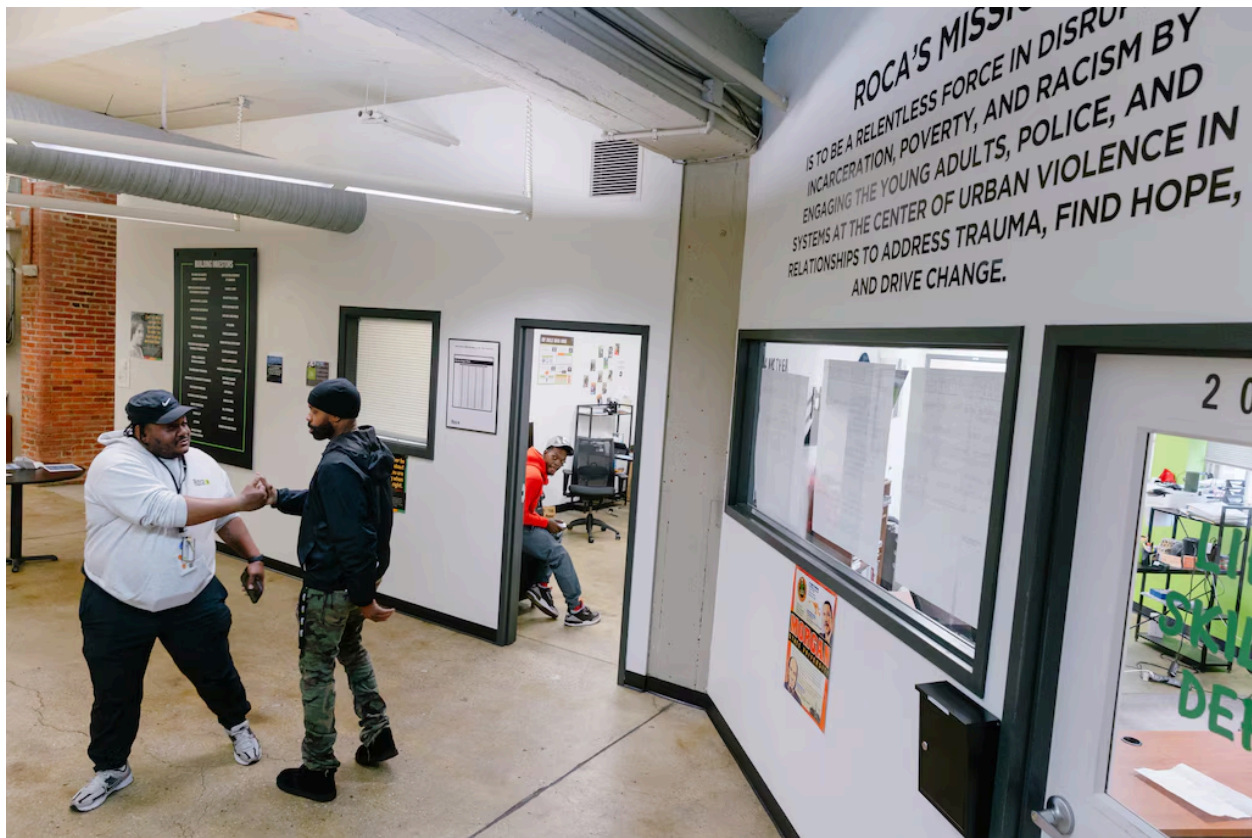
“What we have found, even in my work, is that once you start really pulling the layers back with someone that has been injured, there are a host of other traumas that have happened in that person’s life that have gone unaddressed,” Richardson said.

‘I can’t keep getting locked up’

Back at Roca Baltimore’s office in Mount Vernon, the young men enrolled in the transitional employment program gather in a circle with supervisors to discuss the work week. Fridays are

development days where leaders spend two hours helping them see how the challenges they face at work and how they respond could be applied to other parts of their lives.

They end the sessions offering words of encouragement to one another before collecting their checks. Through transitional employment, the young men work 6 1/2 hours of landscaping or doing trash removal in the city from Monday to Thursday in an effort to build their work ethic. They are paid \$15 an hour.



Staff members greet each other in passing at the Roca headquarters in Baltimore. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)

Participants check in between 7:30 a.m. to 8 a.m., at which time any weapons they may have are confiscated, staff said. The young men aren't drug tested, Roca officials said, but they could be sent home or prohibited from working if they come in smelling like marijuana.

The young people may resist Roca in the beginning, transitional employment manager Deondra Gordon said. But Roca's staff helps them move past that through displaying empathy for their situation, meeting their immediate needs, such as offering food cards and job assistance, and building "transformational relationships."

"Some young men never worked before," Gordon said. "By us understanding every individual is an individual and understanding everybody's circumstances are different and not there to judge them for their situation ... they buy into what we do here."

Mikey, whose last name is being withheld to protect his privacy, was enrolled after being arrested, but he wasn't consistent with his attendance until he experienced Roca staff's relentlessness.

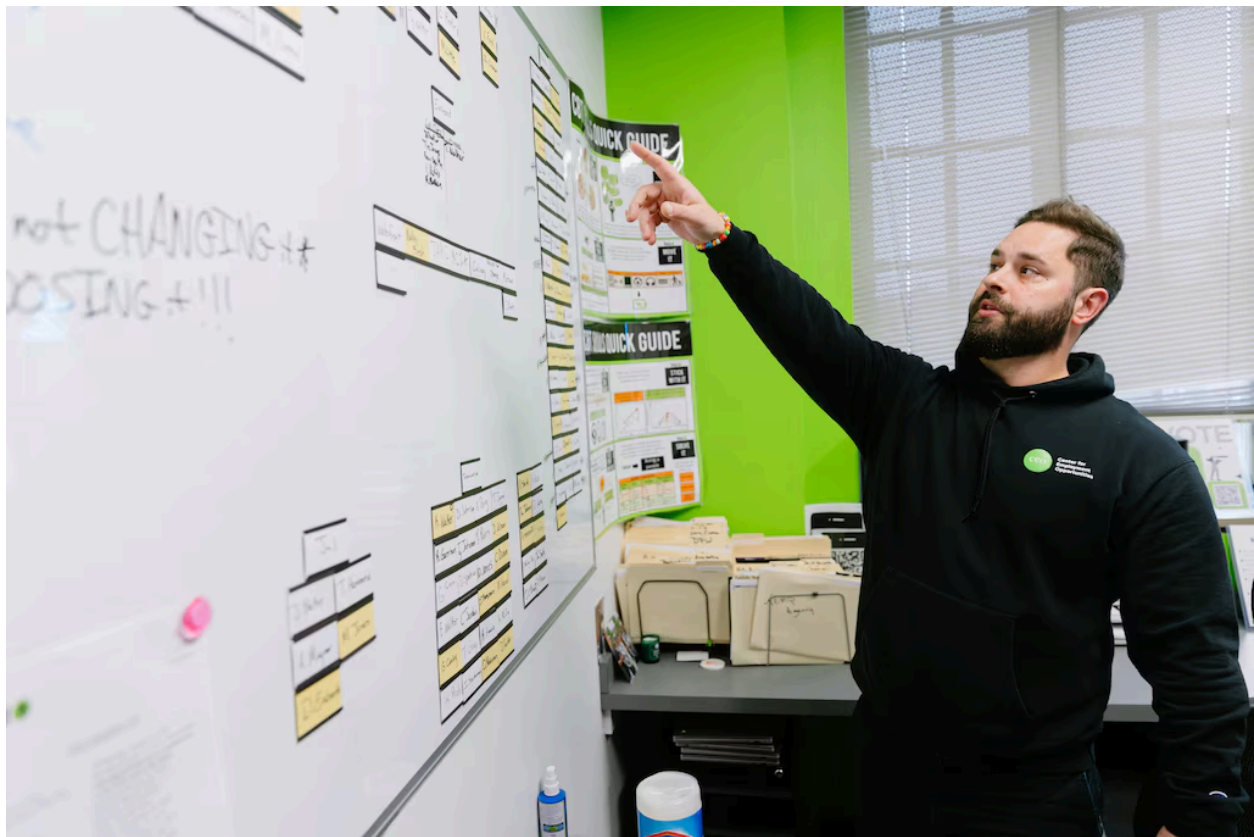
"Y'all pulling up on me every day made me want to get my life together," Mikey said of Roca staff.

He ran into trouble again and was jailed but, upon release, the first thing he did was come to Roca.

"I got locked up. The only people who checked on me was him [his youth worker JT], my uncle and Roca," Mikey said.



A group check-in meeting at the Roca headquarters. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)



Kurtis Palermo, executive vice president of Roca Maryland, explains the job board that connects a rotation of young people with paying jobs around the city. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)

Roca's model keeps participants in the program for three years. Participants who are jailed for longer than six months will likely be dismissed from their caseload. Of the 743 people the organization has enrolled since 2018, 207 were dismissed due to extended incarceration and 35 died by gun violence.

Even so, Roca staff members often stay in touch through updates from lawyers and family members. If the individual still meets Roca's criteria when released, they can rejoin the program.

They'll be welcomed back at Roca Baltimore's Mount Vernon location, which features amenities such as a small gym, laundry facility, education room for pre-GED and GED candidates, shower room and library.

Mikey, who received clothing, shoes and a grocery card from Roca, said he's more committed this time after realizing his reason for being there.

"My 'why' is my daughter. She's my everything," Mikey said. "I can't keep getting locked up."

So far, he's been sticking with the program in hopes of pursuing his auto mechanic certification and establishing a mobile detailing business.

Gordon enrolls the young men in Roca's four workforce readiness courses, which cover conflict resolution, professionalism and other life skills. Like their community work, participants are paid \$15 an hour for attending the courses.

After demonstrating their commitment, Roca connects participants with programs in trades like welding, commercial driving and HVAC.

Roca's relentless approach — praised by many — didn't immediately resonate with Lydia Watts, executive director of the [R.O.A.R. \(Rebuild, Overcome and Rise\)](#) Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Originally from Massachusetts, Watts first encountered the organization after returning there in the mid-2000s.

"When I first learned about Roca, I was like, 'Really? You knock on their door over and over again?'" Watts recalled. "They are autonomous humans. They decide whether they want to do this or not and, if they tell you they don't want to, why are you coming back the next day?"

Over time, she came to appreciate how that persistence builds the trust needed for Roca's target population to consider

enrolling. Founded in 2019, R.O.A.R. provides free medical, legal and social services to crime victims, including Roca participants, as part of its [community partnerships](#).

Gordon said Roca staff members need the ability to connect with young people, a passion to help and resilience. Officials say they recruit through employee and community referrals, job boards, nonprofit networks and word of mouth.



Roca youth worker John Young drives in the rain to one of his daily check-ins with members of the program across the city. (Wesley Lapointe for The Baltimore Banner)

Roca leaders said their best candidates come from communities like those they serve. They value lived experience as much as formal credentials and have hired formerly incarcerated individuals, provided they've left that lifestyle behind, Baldwin said.

Lewis, 53, said he is a “pure example” for the young people in Roca, having formerly been incarcerated and used drugs. He

believes it helps him better connect with the young men, and the love and respect he gets from them once they do come around is similar to what he got while in the streets, he said. Only this time, the message is different.

“I get to still be that person that I felt I was in the streets to now being that person that I know I am. I know I’m here to create a change. I know that they’re listening to me, even if it’s not for the moment,” Lewis said.

Federal funding woes

Roca’s work in Baltimore and other cities faces new uncertainty after key federal dollars for violence prevention programs were abruptly cut earlier this year.

In fiscal year 2024, Roca Baltimore received nearly \$529,000 through the Bureau of Justice Associates Community-based Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative grant. This is one of [over 365 federal grants halted](#) by the Justice Department in April.

Baldwin said the organization lost around \$4 million in April alone, and the biggest task for her moving forward is figuring out how to make up for it. Dwight Robson, the executive vice president of operations at Roca, said they’re planning to appeal the grant’s removal.

In early June, Maryland Attorney General Anthony Brown joined a coalition of over a dozen other states [suing](#) the DOJ over cuts to these programs. Brown called the decision “misguided” and a “threat to public safety” in a statement.

According to budget documents shared with The Baltimore Banner, Roca Baltimore had over \$7 million in funding through earned income, investments, individual donations, corporations, foundations, and state, federal and local government grants.

For fiscal years [2024](#) and [2025](#), Roca received \$938,647, according to Baltimore City's budget. The organization is slated to get the same amount for fiscal year [2026](#).

Roca Baltimore receives nearly \$3 million from the state of Maryland, including money from the state Department of Housing and Community Development Crime and Violence Intervention program.

Del. Luke Clippinger, the chair of the Judiciary Committee, said he and several other committee chairs are monitoring the broader impacts of federal government changes on Marylanders amid the state's "very difficult financial situation."

Clippinger, who represents District 46 in Baltimore, called funding cuts to organizations like Roca who have been integral to homicide and nonfatal shooting reductions in the city "tragic."

"I think it's harder to get to the numbers that we've been seeing without their contributions," Clippinger said. "I think it's harder to get where we want to go without the credible and trained messengers who we put out on the street to engage with people."

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