

**“I think proximity and locality transcends race,  
transcends everything.”**

Phil Sipka  
Founding Member of Kusanya Cafe  
Kusanya Cafe

*Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence*  
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### **Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative**

The Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative (CGVRC) Graduate Student Fellowship brings together student fellows (graduate students from Chicago-based universities) and faculty fellows (professors and public health professionals) to address gun violence by conducting change-oriented research in partnership with Chicago communities.

To learn more about the CGVRC, please visit us at: <https://www.cgvrc.org>

### **Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence**

Our *Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence* project allowed CGVRC Graduate Student Fellows to conduct stakeholder interviews, gaining a diverse perspective on local gun violence and organizational efforts to prevent it. This work was funded through support from the Shure Charitable Trust, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and United Way of Metropolitan Chicago.

**Biography:** This interview is with Phil Sipka, he is a founding member of Kusanya Café, a non-for-profit coffee shop located in Englewood. This interview was done as part of the Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative Graduate Student Fellowship series, *Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence*. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**CGVRC Fellow:** So, to start can you tell me about you, how long you've been in Chicago?

**Sipka:** I moved to Chicago in 2008. I've only lived in Englewood since I've been in Chicago so I've been living here almost 10 years and I am the executive director of the Kusanya Café which is a non-profit coffee shop in the neighborhood.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Great, can you talk to me about this organization? When did your involvement start? Did it start in the beginning?

**Sipka:** Yeah, I was one of the founding members in 2009... 2010. It took us a long time to get started but we opened in 2013. So, we've been open almost four and a half years now.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Can you talk about the start, why did you guys choose to open a café, and here?

**Sipka:** We decided to do a café because we wanted to do something empowering for our neighborhood and at that time there weren't any gathering places in our community, at least intergenerational inter-economic gathering places. There's always barber shops, there's always churches, but there wasn't a place where everyone could go to and have access. So, we choose a café format because we wanted to have something that could be really flexible. We could do art events, music events, poetry stuff, and a bunch of different things. So, we do a bunch of things out of this format because it's flexible. And everybody eats food, everybody likes good food, and we found that food is a unifying factor. We have a diverse populace in the neighborhood, people coming from a lot of different backgrounds. We aren't racially diverse, but we are very diverse in a lot of other ways.

**CGVRC Fellow:** So, would you say this organization's primary goal is about selling coffee and being a café or is more about being this gathering place?

**Sipka:** That's why we are a non-profit. We generate our own revenue because who gives you money is who has the power. So, you can be a non-profit and say you make decisions but really if someone pulls your funding than you're not doing that next year. So, we wanted to be a self-funded outfit, so we generate all our own revenue, so we can continue to do things the way we do them; that's why our board members are all Englewood residents. So, everybody at every stage of the game, we control what happens in here.

**CGVRC Fellow:** As time has gone on have you guys met the vision that you had? Or has it evolved?

**Sipka:** Yeah, well we started out with a loose format because we wanted Englewood to be able to make it what it wanted. If you plan things too rigidly then it's really not the neighbors, "oh but it's yours" "well you planned every single thing out." Yeah, in some ways it's been more beautiful than we imagined and in some ways it's been tougher than we imagined. Since everyone had lived in the neighborhood we knew certain things would be difficult. We knew that starting new things, and having people be courageous with their buying habits is not something that we had as a strength in our neighborhood. Trying out new places is not our thing. Change has been tough on this neighborhood for decades. So,

any sort of change is initially met with resistance. We knew that was going to come. At this stage in the game, four years in, we have had a lot more resident buy-in. All our events are run by Englewood residents or Englewood organizations. We don't even do events anymore. People from the neighborhood just say, "hey, I want to take this over." So, we're living out more than we expected would happen.

**CGVRC Fellow:** That's cool. Are there any other organizations like you guys, that are doing similar things?

**Sipka:** In the neighborhood here?

**CGVRC Fellow:** Yeah, are you guys alone in this or is Englewood?

**Sipka:** Oh no, there's a lot of great organizations doing a lot of stuff. We might be alone in the non-profit food sales I think, and that's a weird for the United States, not just for Englewood. Englewood is a small town kind of feeling and most of the non-profits know each other and work with each other, or even organizations not just non-profits. So there's Growing Homes, Urban Farm in the neighborhood, there's I-Grow Chicago – they partner with us and do all our free yoga events – there's Teamwork Englewood who's been doing it for a really long time and doing a lot of great stuff in the neighborhood for a long time, there's Imagine Englewood down the block, and there's a lot of great organizations that have been working hard in doing all of their little parts because no organization is going to change the neighborhood by themselves, that's for sure.

**CGVRC Fellow:** That's great. I'm going to go ahead and go with the next questions that are more about gun violence specifically in the neighborhood. Can you describe your personal perception of gun violence in this neighborhood?

**Sipka:** My perception is that it definitely exists, and it's not a random thing, it's a very specific thing. My perception is that if you're involved in the game then it's going to really affect you. For the people not involved in it, it's going to be something you witness, and that affects you. Personally, I've never feared getting shot. I've been in close proximity to a lot of it, but I'm not laying awake at night worried that a bullet is going to hit me, ever. But I get the feeling that it is a very small percentage of the populace that is involved in it. If you're participating, you'll make a lot of noise but they're a very low percentage of our neighborhood.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Do you feel maybe the perception other people have of Englewood violence, is exaggerated?

**Sipka:** Oh, I think it's ridiculous! Well, I think we're scared of what we don't know. Anything that's foreign or unknown is scary to us. That's why we're segregated as a city.

**CGVRC Fellow:** We don't know each other like in the city as a whole or in this neighborhood?

**Sipka:** If you're unfamiliar with a populace or a segment of people, for some reason our natural human inclination is to be nervous or fearful. Whether that's racial, sexual, or whatever, we're nervous. But if we were to only have any sort of personal touch or contact with those people we would realize very quickly how closely related we are and how life happens everywhere, and people are very similar and, I think there is far less to worry about. I am not fearful at all in my neighborhood, not at all. In fact, the

communal nature of Englewood and the small town feel of it – the people – this is not a transient neighborhood as much, I mean there are transient segments like in every neighborhood, but there are people who have lived here 50, 60 years, on my block. And they know who I am, and they will look out for me, and I feel safer here than I would if I moved to Lakeview just because people might not care to ever get to know me there. I may be just another person walking down the block. But here they know who I am.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Wow, that's great insight. So, part of the stuff we're doing is also looking at the different assets of different community areas. Do you think this communal aspect is pretty unique to Englewood or do you think other communities have this?

**Sipka:** I think it manifests differently. I wouldn't say communal natural is just a property of neighborhoods like Englewood – neighborhoods that have undergone a lot of injustice – but I do think undergoing injustice together makes you bond together in a way you can't when you're just living for your own benefit, to a certain extent. So, I think there is a unifying factor that we are trying to move together for something else. I think that brings us together. And I think when everybody has all their needs taken care of they don't need anybody else, so you have a lot less need to rely on other people. So, the actual logistics of having to rely on other people makes you closer.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Something that you mentioned was if you're not involved in the game, then you really have nothing to fear. Could you talk a little about the game; what do you mean by that?

**Sipka:** I mean if you're involved in the culture if it's the creed you live by – then that is essential to your success and existence in this world. I don't think it's something that is enjoyable, but we all live by our own codes. We all have them in life, whether it's "get ahead no matter what," whether it's "do well in education and everything will be fine," there's certain life codes that we all have that we're all taught. And unfortunately for people who were born into this – maybe to call it a game is a little trite – but, born into that particular culture. And let me reiterate that is not Englewood culture. There's specific subsets of culture within every single neighborhood. So that is a specific culture with it's specific value system with specific goals and specific things and I think you do not choose it because it's great, you choose it because that's what you see and that's what you are a part of. What we don't have is diverse options in the public sphere, and what I mean by public – and one of the reasons why we started the café – was to get more of the diverse people who live in Englewood out into the public sphere. What I mean is outside, walking around, where they can interact with their neighbors. Right, so you can have a person living in a neighborhood (and a lot of people do) that have nice jobs downtown, they commute to work every day, their kids go to nice magnet schools, but they're car door to front door people. Their kids aren't playing outside. They're not just going out walking down the blocks or whatever, they are car door to front door. They got a great deal on the house.

They've been hustling they've been doing it right, staunchly middle class, they're living in the neighborhood, or their family used to live there and they're taking over their parent's house or whatever. But how do we get those people back out into the public sphere? There could be somebody who is literally in web design on your block, but you don't even know it because you haven't even seen them outside that much. Who's working at the Ford plant or whatever, you know those aren't the public faces of the block. Now they're there and that's a culture all in of itself in the neighborhood, but they're just not out in public as much. So, if the only public faces you see are people of that culture, we emulate only what we can see, if we can't see it, it doesn't mean anything. I always give the analogy that if someone told me tomorrow that, "Phil you could win the Chicago marathon", well maybe if I was

Kenyan you know, but I'm not, that's not me. But if next year someone from my block won the Chicago marathon, I would immediately think I could do it, "I was like, man if I worked hard enough I probably could do it." Which is weird, which changes nothing about my physical attributes or anything. But I would literally believe it was possible if I saw it. Now, I think we have that all the time. We'll tell people "you can be anything you want" but it's like I've never seen someone do that, I've never seen someone get up and do this or work this out, or commute downtown, I haven't seen it. And I think we undervalue that. I think proximity and locality transcends race, transcends everything.

**CGVRC Fellow:** I wonder if we can use this idea, if someone in your block does it, if they've done it, then you feel like you can do it, right? Can we transition this to maybe how we can solve gun violence. You know, any ideas, what are your thoughts?

**Sipka:** The only solution I can totally see is the one that is never going to happen.

**CGVRC Fellow:** What's that?

**Sipka:** And that's for people with assets to move back to communities and stop being so selfish. The reason we have problems like this, are not because we don't put enough funding towards it, not because we haven't had enough programs, or invested enough in our schools. The reason we have this problem is because middle class people are scared to death of (a) black people, and (b) poor people. That's why no neighborhood that's over 40% African American ever gentrifies. That's why neighborhoods like Englewood are continually struggling with problems. That's why schools are always going to be a problem. It doesn't matter... they could put a laptop in every kid's hand, they could have all the best technology in Englewood high school. But you can't change the culture of the neighborhood. So, funding doesn't matter. What the problem is that everybody is so fearful right now. Fearful that putting their kids in public school is going to threaten them for life. So, people with the most resources in the entire world, whose kids will always be able to get ahead no matter what school they go to, they're scared to death to put their kid next to some poor student from any neighborhood. So, they won't put them in a public school because it's the irresponsible thing to do for my kid.

Meanwhile, that makes CPS bad, and teachers get blamed for it, and they say there is no way I can teach a class room of 80% of kids that come from chaotic families, it's almost impossible, it doesn't matter what you do. And then they get blamed and then they get bitter. Englewood is the way it is because of a lot of city injustice. But it's the way it is because of white flight, it's the way it is because of black flight. And the only way is having a mixture of people return and get a healthy mixture. When neighborhoods are really healthy they have a great mixture of a whole bunch of different residents. You have people with resources living next to people living without resources. And they all end up empowering each other. People with resources get a much better perspective on life, a little healthier perspective. People without resources get to have access to all the goodies the middle class always gets. They always get to take them, and they always hold on to them. Right now, I just think we're hoarding and as long as the middle class keeps hoarding all the resources, these problems are going to happen no matter how much money you throw at it.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Great, very insightful, thank you. So, about this problem: scared of black and scared of poor, and this white flight black flight you mentioned, and you said this solution is not going to happen. Let's say we fast forward into this world, into the future; and let's say it did happen – just hypothetically – if it were to happen what do you think would have caused that to happen? Can you think of anything that could make something like this happen? Or help it happen?

**Sipka:** That's a great question. How do you make people less selfish? Somehow, they will have to see it intrinsically as good for themselves. They will have to actually believe it's a better life for themselves. I believe it is a better life, that's why I live here. It's not sacrificial for me. I love living here. My life is richer because I'm here. I'm not working towards a mid-life crisis. There's purpose to my life. I'm not going to wake up and be like "what the hell am I doing?" Like, no, I know what I'm doing. I don't know what would cause people to do that. I don't think shame will work. Unfortunately, even though I think people should be shamed (laughter). I don't think that will work. Our American culture is just so strong and it crosses almost all ethnicities, we all want the goods that America has to give and that means we hoard resources and if anyone wants to take it from you or if anyone is trying to get better than that means they're taking it from you, so you need to guard it even more.

Like, how do you get people to open their clenched fist and just kind of realize that if they actually would let a little bit go they would actually receive so much more in return. I believe that our schools would be better, they would need to be less funded if this happened. I believe violent crime would go way down just because the multitude of options that are going to happen. People don't join gangs because they have a million options; it's not like they're going to go "oh man, should I go do this internship at this tech company or should I join a gang?" That decision process is not there. But once you put it there, you're really reducing the likelihood, because people are generally going to choose better. It's racist and classist in our mentality to think that people are choosing these things. You know why is because we would feel really bad if it wasn't a choice. Then we feel guilty. So, if we could put it on somebody as being stupid or being ignorant and that it is just education that is the problem, it's really racist and classist to think about it that way. And the reason we do this is because we would feel terrible. And I think that is the main problem – the lack of recognition of privilege. We all have privilege in our lives, it doesn't matter how much money you got or whatever, you have a certain degree of privilege that is more than somebody else and is less than somebody else. You had certain people that were in your life and certain people that weren't in your life that really would have helped you if they would have been depending on what home you came from so I would say, people on the block in my block/neighborhood came from all different levels of privilege. Even though they grew up in the same block! That's the way their family was, what was their family life like? Did they have mentors, did they have grandparents that were involved in their life?

Whatever it was, it's completely different, but if we just recognized our privilege then we could stop taking credit for everything that we did right and stop getting blamed for everything wrong that happened to us to a certain extent. But the reason we hold on to privilege so tightly, and the reason I think white people hold on to privilege so tightly is because the moment you recognize you have a whole lot of privilege is the moment that you recognize: (a) you didn't earn it, and (b) that you have a lot of things that are unearned, and a lot of people didn't get those same things. And you immediately feel guilty and we don't want to feel guilty, we want to feel good for all the goodies that we have. We want to feel like we did this, and that's why we deserve it. Because if it wasn't earned than it's not deserved. And that's a bad place to be in, right? You just got all this free stuff that you didn't earn but that person didn't get it all that stuff. Then I have to be responsible for that knowledge, so we'll fight it with a lot of irrational arguments, and whatever. So that was a really long explanation for why I just don't know how we can get people to admit something they really don't want to admit.

**CGVRC Fellow:** If we don't know maybe how to do that, do we know who is responsible to help people figure that out? Like should this be something that our educators try to help their students, or as

research institutions should we be trying to help people be aware of privilege as a solution to gun violence?

**Sipka:** Well, I mean it's always on the people in power, it's their responsibility to be the ones that say this. So for me, the upper echelon of the upper middle-class – white persons for sure, it's on them to educate. But they are going to be the most resistant probably. I think on a city-wide policy scale there are small things we can do. The massive restrictions on section 8 housing in nicer neighborhoods is unjust and criminal. Especially because the city has promised it, and they haven't done it. So they are recreating section 8, recreating Cabrini-Green in Englewood, and Robert Taylor homes is now Englewood and other neighborhoods. So, they have dumping grounds for section 8 tenants. There could have been a great opportunity for diversity, but of course what did upper middle class people do? They fought it off, "not on my neighborhood." I need to protect my home values, it's not racism, I'm just not going to let you in. It's for my mortgage or home-value, so if one section-8 tenant moves on the block that can decrease my value. That's what's happening.

The city actually needs to do what it says and be a little bit more equitable, but they are never willing to do it where it actually counts. When it actually comes to integrating this city that's where they fall short every single time. They have all these options. You literally have thousands of displacements. At this point, you can put them in a neighborhood. Let's say a tenant, somebody who used to live in Cabrini-Green, a great parent, doing a great job, you put them smack dab in the middle of Lakeview. They are now accessible to a million different resources that they never had. That could be life changing. But we don't do that. We literally shut them out. And you look at those maps where section-8 tenants have been allowed to reside and it's like almost none, because they fought them, and the city could have said sorry we promised this was going to happen, but they didn't. And the way they incentivized things financially is ludicrous. In Englewood, section 8 pay-out area rates they don't even pay the neighborhood rate so section 8 pays out way more than a market-rate tenant would ever pay so landlords don't even want to rent to market-rate they only want to rent to section-8. When I was trying to find another apartment to rent nobody would even talk to me, they only wanted section-8 tenants, so what do we do, we have huge collection of section-8 tenants, yet again. So, we are pushing all of our people with lesser resources into one area so that our nice and privileged class can never even have to see a poor person living in their neighborhood. And how good would that be? How sickly is this group – and by this group I mean the rich people – that they don't interact with anybody different then people all in their class? And that segregation only causes them to be sicker in their mentality and view other neighborhoods without the correct vision I guess. So, I guess that's one hard policy I could say that should be enforced.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Well and that separation, I can see how that could create that scared of black scared of poor cycle right?

**Sipka:** Oh yeah, it just keeps it going so the more segregated we get, they continually become more and more fearful over here which has no basis in reality, which causes segregation even more and more. And the fact that we are literally replaying the garbage that happened in Alabama, like, today, boggles my mind. There was a few years ago when South Loop had one school across Cermak was half full but it was a black school and their school was overpopulated and they couldn't fit any more people and instead of having some of their kids go to that school, they wanted to build a whole brand new school. And CPS couldn't afford it, they had a half empty school and they had an overflowing school, but they didn't want to, and it's like how is that not the exact same thing? And all these white liberal parents are all super excited about, like, they will be all militant on you know on like MLK day but literally we'll be replicating

the same system “for the betterment of the kids,” right? Yeah, sorry, I get so boxy with this stuff, but that’s the problems that we have, that’s what’s causing this. Yeah, I think that’s the main thing.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Those are some great insights. A big purpose of this is to figure out what are the problems and then have those be things that we work on. As far as from an outsider’s point of view, like a research organization such as the Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative, what do you think that these types of people should do? Should they try to talk to city of Chicago with trying to deal with policy issues or should they come to the community, I guess maybe not more programing or funding is the solution but what role do you feel like these outsiders should play?

**Sipka:** I don’t know. I am very doubtful that politics will ever be a way out because they are so intertwined with money. Until politics gets away from money it’s always going to bend to “that group.” And that group is super fearful so they’re never going to get “woke” right? Because they are only doing more and more to segregate themselves. And they’re the ones donating. So, is a politician going to risk their whole career on a policy that’s good but alienates them from their donor base? I don’t know. So, I guess I don’t have a lot of faith in politics even though they could easily with the stroke of a pen, do some really great stuff. Even though they’ve already said it, they say it in words but they won’t do it. I think the only solution is for some families and for some people to begin to move into some neighborhoods and not with the bad idea of gentrifying – people have a lot of bad ideas of what gentrifying is because we don’t understand it – but every neighborhood needs civically minded middle-class residents.

No neighborhood doesn’t need good residents to move in. And I don’t mean good by middle-class that’s not the case, but by good I mean people that dream for their entire neighborhood not just for themselves. Not just for their financially well-off, so I can get a cheap deal on their mortgage and then it will appreciate, and I can sell it. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about people who come into a neighborhood and for the neighborhood’s sake want to live in and be a part and enter into the history of that neighborhood. We all need that, so I think the long story is we need some people to move in and begin to dream dreams for the entirety of the neighborhood. And then we need other people to see those people living in that neighborhood and then go, ‘wow, this is really nice, I really like this, this is a good life.’ I don’t know how you do that policy wise, or even organizationally but I truly believe that is the only solution. It’s just a more communal and neighborly way. I don’t think educational courses, I don’t think even mentoring is going to get people out of that culture. The same problem we have with gun violence culture is the same problem we have with middle-class culture, right? You can’t just teach it, you can’t just sit a bunch of people in a classroom and say, “your privileged.” They are going to resist it. Just like you could mentor some kid, but when you’re in that culture you’re in it. Right? And people don’t tear down their idols quickly, they just don’t because then they would have to completely reorganize their entire priority structure their entire life and we don’t want to do that, we would rather just stay with it, then literally reorganize the entire way we perceive the world.

**CGVRC Fellow:** And even if the “how” is hard to figure out, at least being able to focus on the “what” that needs to be done, that is super helpful for us and thank you for providing a lot of the “what’s.” So, I have another question, do you feel optimistic about gun violence in Englewood – that things are going to improve?

**Sipka:** That things are going to improve? No, not really. I think as long as we have those same problems that we have I don’t see it changing. There are small things that can alleviate it a little bit, but it won’t chip away at the culture itself. I mean maybe a couple kids might get jobs at the new brewery, and that

might give them a little bit of hope, you know what I mean? Some new business might open up and there might be a few more jobs in the area or whatever but, no I think the problems are so deep that it's going to need the neighborhood. There is just going to have to be bigger sweeping changes. Yeah, it's going to stay the same for a while.

**CGVRC Fellow:** Great, thank you. Alright, I guess just the last question: is there anything else you would like to tell us about any of your other thoughts about the community or about gun violence that we haven't covered already in this interview?

**Sipka:** I would like to reiterate that gun violence – although I've seen my fair share – it is something that is very much on the periphery of my life here, it does not make up the majority of my life here. And that's another one of the misconceptions, once you live here you don't think about that all the time. At least I don't, and I can't speak for the neighborhood I can only speak for myself. You know, and I have all my privileges too. So, I experience it differently than other people do. But, there are so many beautiful things that I love about the neighborhood. And gun is not the narrative. It wouldn't even be the first thing I would talk about, it probably wouldn't be the sixth or seventh thing I would talk about when I'm asked to talk about my neighborhood. And I think that is important to know. Because there is some great life that goes on here, like truly heroic people. And I think that's the reason why I moved to the neighborhood in the first place because I have this theory that heroes can only exist where there's a battle to fight and if there's no battle to fight, heroes atrophy or they go and move elsewhere, and there's a lot of heroes here and I wanted to lock arms with some of these people. They're doing it, and they're doing it in really weird, heroic ways like the person that continually works with kids or that continually cleans up their lawn every single day no matter if somebody walking by is just going to throw some trash and every day they're out there cleaning it or out there doing stuff or if they're involved with their neighbors or starting a program or just using their gifts really generously. And that happens all the time around here. And I love knowing and being friends with and working along sides those people.