



Love Thy Neighbor

BY ERIC ADLER

PHOTOS BY STEVE MORSE

YOU MIGHT THINK OF HIM AS MR. SILVER LINING, Mr. Alchemy or the man with the Midas touch. Better yet, you might think of 56-year-old Jim Nunnelly, AB '66, as he thinks of himself: as a fixer, a finder, a community-minded guy with whatever you want to call it—a talent, a gift, a passion—for taking a troubled moment, a troubled organization, or even a troubled life and, through hard, hard work, fixing it.

Finding the good.
Turning it around.
Making it better.
Making it work.

"Realizing that something can be fixed," Nunnelly says, "can be beautiful." As an African American born poor in then-segregated Columbia, he's done it with his own life. He's done it with others. These days, in Jackson County, Mo.—home to Kansas City and its flood of urban drug woes—he's doing it again, having taken the helm of Jackson County's once-founding anti-drug initiative and, in seven years, turned it around.

The initiative is called COMBAT (the Community Backed Anti-Drug Tax), which in 1989 authorized money from a one-fourth-cent sales tax increase (\$14 million to \$18 million a year) to go to the Jackson County prosecutor's office to fight drugs. Today it is

lauded as a national model, but in its early years, COMBAT wasn't as much a failure as it was, well, invisible.

"It wasn't well-organized. I don't think that was anyone's fault," says Dana Hunt, a Cambridge, Mass., social scientist who in August released an evaluation of COMBAT commissioned by the National Institute of Justice. "I think the tax passed, suddenly all this money

rolled in, and there was nothing in place. It was trying to figure out where it was going."

In 1993, it did. Claire McCaskill, AB '76, JD '77, then county prosecutor and now Missouri's state auditor, went to Nunnelly. Not to a cop or a lawyer or a judge or any of the lock-'em-up law enforcers that one might expect to help lead the siege on drugs. She went to Nunnelly, a "public health" professional, of all people. To the easy-tempered and tireless guy who, in 1969, came to Kansas City to work for

three months at a housing project health clinic and stayed for 31 years. To the guy who, for more than 20 years, guided the transformation of that clinic from a cramped office, where 17 patients were seen in the first month, into the Samuel U. Rodgers Community Health Center, an indispensable clinic serving 500 low-income patients a day. She went to the guy who—when a volun-



Jim Nunnelly, center, talks with Jim Sturgeon, left, and Wayne Lucas, right, outside a University of Missouri-Kansas City building. Sturgeon, professor of economics, and Lucas, professor of sociology, are researching the best ways for Nunnelly and COMBAT to handle substance abuse. At left: Nunnelly stands atop City Hall in Kansas City.



Phyllis Washington, right, principal at Allen-Edison Village charter school, watches Nunnelly's grandchildren work on computers. Nunnelly helped develop Kansas City's charter school concept.



At the Samuel U. Rodgers Community Health Center, Nunnelly meets with, from left, health workers Angie McGee and

teen stint with the embattled Kansas City Housing Authority turned into a two-year job running the whole shebang—lifted the authority \$1 million into the black after being \$4 million in the red. She went to the guy who, because he had been poor, can't help but help the poor, the homeless, the ill. And because he has helped so many, so often, has developed more community connections than Southwestern Bell.

"So I went out and lured him," McCaskill says. She knew that for COMBAT to truly combat the drug problem, it needed to offer treatment, not just law enforcement; it needed to offer prevention, not just punishment; it needed to offer support and incentives to keep kids away from drugs and crime, not just wait to toss them in jail. "I knew we needed a public health professional, not a criminal justice professional," McCaskill says. "Not only was Jim the right guy in terms of who he knew, but in terms of what he knew."

What does he know? Plenty. And not just about working with different agencies or putting together programs, of

which COMBAT now supports nearly 80. What he knows is that you don't give up, not on adults, and especially not on kids. Even if they're raised in horrible circumstances and seem lost and destined for drugs or crime. If there's something inside, something good, and often there is, Nunnelly says, you do what you can. You reach out.

"It's kind of like knowing there are a lot of diamonds in a mine," Nunnelly says. "What I'm saying is that there are a whole lot of children that are diamonds. And you might have to dig a little bit, and shine them up a bit, but for the most part, they're there." A lot of people kind of skip over them too quickly. But with a little work, and a little rearranging and a little attention, and a lot of community resources, things can change for that child and for society. "It's not a ministry. It's more an awareness that you're willing to go beyond the surface to find out what's there."

In his office, on the 11th floor of the Jackson County Courthouse, Nunnelly points to a framed portrait hanging next to snapshots of his wife, son, daughter

and four grandchildren. "You see this? This to me says more about what we're trying to do than anything else." The picture, titled "I Choose Life," by artist Ronnie Phillips, shows an African-American girl, about age 10, standing in a dancer's black leotard, her back straight, her hair braided atop her head, her chin tilted at a regal angle. She stands on a weedy sidewalk. Behind her rises a forbidding cinder block wall smattered with graffiti and gang symbols.

But the little girl is ignoring the wall. Instead her chin, her torso, her bright yellow-toed shoes are pointed away, to her right, and in the direction of one tiny word on the wall behind her: life. "That's our task," Nunnelly says. "To get them to the point where they automatically choose the right direction."

Nunnelly knows how difficult those choices can be for children, especially if they grow up amid poverty or violence, finding little support and few alternatives. Nunnelly was poor. But, in contrast to countless kids who take to drugs and crime today, he was given great encouragement by his parents, he says. They



Charles Beckman, and Donna Valponi of Hallmark. The group prepares for a 5K run to benefit breast cancer treatment.

both worked at MU. "My mother was a baker and my father was a janitor. And it's kind of interesting. He was completely illiterate. He was completely illiterate, but education was his highest value. I became his example."

Born the fifth of six brothers and sisters, Nunnelly realized as a boy that with opportunities for blacks increasing, his family's hopes for a college graduate rested on him. His brothers and sisters had taught him to read by age 4 and tutored him year-round. "They took me to church. They took me to school, brought me to my room in advance," Nunnelly says. "Which goes back to what I'm trying to do for those kids who don't have anybody looking out for them."

In 1961, Nunnelly entered MU on a Curators Scholarship as a liberal arts student. "I was real scared. Trust me," Nunnelly says. At that time there were about 37 African Americans on the campus of 18,000 students. "But I don't think I was as afraid of the University as much as I was of failure. There were so many people watching. I would walk up the street from my home, and people would



During the day, Nunnelly takes advantage of every free second. Here, waiting to meet with the county commissioner, Nunnelly ducks into an office to make some calls, from soliciting funding to talking with his wife, Janice. He says his best asset is time management.

give me rides to school. My father had done a good job of telling people I was going to the University. I was more afraid of letting everyone down. All eyes on you."

But for Nunnelly, MU was also a place where he had his own eyes opened. "I had a couple of epiphanies while I was there," he says, one of which he uses and reflects on even now. "I had a professor of history who gave me a bad mark," Nunnelly recalls. "I was very humbled."

At orientation, students were told that if they were confused or had questions, they should see their professors. Nunnelly still recalls his visit with the historian, who said, "You know, you're trying to learn history from an absorption point of view. You have to learn it from how people felt at the time." He talked to Nunnelly about the persecution of the Jews in Hitler's Germany. "People were afraid, just as you're afraid as a young black person. You know why people join gangs. You know why they commit crimes. And you know why people don't have jobs."

Nunnelly was thankful for that talk.

"He made education meaningful to me." In his work, it's a lesson he contemplates often: Put yourself in others' shoes—how they feel, what they need, what helps, what works. Years after he graduated and went on to earn his master's in public health at the University of Michigan, he remembered the lesson at the Kansas City Housing Authority.

"When I told people I was going to the housing authority, they said, 'You're going where? They kill people down there.'" Nunnelly says.

"But to me, they were my neighbors."

So it is with COMBAT—with the drug users its programs treat and with the kids it's trying to save. Some 4,500 individuals are treated through COMBAT each year. More than 10,000 kids are touched by anti-drug messages.

To Nunnelly, they're his neighbors, too. ☼