

In 2017, Leslie was there when her younger son got accepted into two colleges and when he graduated from New Bedford High School — an achievement not without its obstacles.

She was there, standing beside that same 17-year-old son, in a New Bedford office for youth services when a staff member pointed their attention to a computer screen on the desk. Leslie couldn't make sense of what she described as data or a chart on the screen, but its significance soon hit: she was told it contained the words “gang affiliated” and her son's name.

Her confusion became dismay.

“Excuse me, my son just got accepted into two colleges, like how is he on any type of gang list?” Leslie recounted.

Her son shook his head, dumbfounded. He was one of about 30 high school seniors to receive the Superintendent's Success Award. His desire to get assistance with a summer job application from the New Bedford Shannon program and the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative, two youth-focused, violence prevention programs, is what brought them to the office that day.

Leslie said the designation needed to be removed, but she said she was told it was not possible. She did not contact police to address what she saw as an error. Any process to fix it seemed unreachable, unknown and futile.

Her thoughts quickly shifted tracks from “what do we do” to “this is what we are going to do” — her son was going to get a job, and he was going to go to college in the fall.

Years later in March of 2021, Leslie and a few other New Bedford mothers, some of whom she has known for years, decided to come together as a group with two aims: create change within the community and share the knowledge they “had to learn the hard way” about raising their sons with the police, school and court systems.

A few months later, they named themselves Voices of the Unheard: speaking for their sons, who they say do not trust anyone else to share their stories; and for other mothers who, like Leslie, may be asking, “what do we do?”

A month after the mothers formed their group, a Boston-based youth advocacy organization [released a critical report](#) alleging the New Bedford Police Department over-polices Black people and youth in the city. Based on department data, the organization, Citizens for Juvenile Justice, also found that Black residents were [more than 27 times as likely](#) to be identified as a gang member. Thirteen people in the dataset, provided in October of 2020, were between the ages of 15 and 17.

Following a departmental review for a new policy that finished in October, Police Chief Paul Oliveira told The Light that the department had “a lot of inaccurate data” on gang membership because there “wasn’t a lot of direction and oversight over the process.” He also said they were “generous” in what they classified as validated gang members for the advocacy group’s data request.

To determine gang membership, the police department uses a criteria list. Each criterion has a specific point value, and until recently, if individuals received at least 10 points, they were labeled as gang members. Under a new policy that took effect in October, an individual must now receive at least 20 points to be labeled a gang affiliate.

One criterion is being in a “group-related” photograph, which was previously four points but is now one point. During her son’s baby shower this fall, one mother of Voices of the Unheard looked toward the venue’s stage where her son (the father-to-be) and his childhood friends were laughing as they posed for a picture. Very briefly, she thought how nice they all looked dressed up for the happy occasion as a family friend snapped away.

Then she thought about how the photos could get them into trouble with law enforcement. The joy of the moment was quickly replaced with a lingering anxiety.

“If this picture gets out, this is a gang picture,” said Jill. “Even to share those memories, we have to be cautious,” she said, with concern and frustration apparent in her voice. “I can’t just go on Facebook and dump all the photos from the baby shower... some of that can be taken and misconstrued and used against them... and that shouldn’t be the thought.”

Chief Oliveira previously said an intel officer monitors social media, among other information sources, to help identify gang affiliation or who might have been involved in an incident.

The photo criterion can be counted multiple times, said department public information officer Lt. Scott Carola. He noted, though, that investigators are not looking at baby shower photos to identify possible gang members. He said they are looking for “legitimate photographs” that display gang signs, gang colors, weapons and money.

Jill found out her Black son was allegedly identified as a gang affiliate or member after he was arrested a few years ago at 20 years old. He was charged with multiple firearm offenses, according to a court docket, but all charges were dismissed without prejudice at the request of the commonwealth.

While her son was in jail for a few days, all she could do was pace back and forth in her home. Jill recounted how someone told her she was the only person who didn’t believe her son was in a gang.

The gang that her son was allegedly identified as being a part of was not a real gang, the mothers said, but instead was a name that the group of friends came up with to mourn the loss of their friend who was killed at 15 years old. Renee Ledbetter, director of the New Bedford Shannon program, has previously said the group was created to honor the killed teen.

According to a 2018 state report for the New Bedford Shannon program, the gang was listed as one of the largest for that year.

Oliveira has said the gang identification system is a means of preventing gang-related violence and identifying at-risk youth who could benefit from programs, such as the Shannon program or the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative.

Civil rights activists, attorneys and youth advocates have argued the gang member label can affect how one is policed and treated in the courtroom with sentencing. For the sons, the label was another instance of policing that contributed to the stress some of them still experience today.

“I think it’s the trauma that’s left afterwards. The PTSD that comes from all these negative interactions that they’ve had over time... It just packs on and packs on,” Leslie said.

Citizens for Juvenile Justice found Black people in New Bedford were disproportionately represented in police field incident reports, though the police department noted in its response that field incident reports do not always involve a stop or capture criminal behavior. The department generally criticized the organization’s data analysis and findings overall.

The mothers are trying to establish themselves as a nonprofit advocacy organization and expand to other areas in the community. They are also in the process of preparing a community action plan to present to city officials, including the mayor and City Council members, that seeks transparency, accountability and attention on disparities in the school, court and police systems.

Jill said emphatically that they do not think all New Bedford police officers are bad. Rather, she said there are a few “bad apples” on the force that the department needs to address.

Longtime advocates for their own sons, the moms want to teach other parents how to be the best advocates for their children, imparting information they didn’t have years ago — information Leslie might have used when she was standing in that office years ago with her son.