

# Out of Harm's Way

**Rob Ingram '09** draws upon his own challenging childhood as Director of Portland's Office of Youth Violence Prevention.

**R**ob Ingram sees a lot of himself in the faces of the youth he meets as the Director of the City of Portland's Office of Youth Violence Prevention (OYVP). Ingram, 35, works in the local community – and nationwide – on various outreach and communications efforts in the hopes of steering vulnerable youth away from criminal behavior. And Ingram, currently a business administration major in WP's Adult Degree Program, knows his territory.

Ingram grew up in NE Portland during the rise of gang violence and the influx of crack cocaine in the late 1980s. He's watched members of his family succumb to drugs and alcohol. He's seen people gunned down, and even



SCOTT A. THOMPSON

Adult Degree student **Rob Ingram '09** grew up surrounded by gang activity.

His hiring came at a critical time. Gang violence spiked nearly 70 percent in Portland in 2008. According to local reports, Portland police responded to 68 cases of gang violence last year, the majority of which were shootings.

Although Ingram's office isn't part of the police bureau, he and his 3-member staff are tied into the city's Youth Gang

the family had lived in a gang-affected neighborhood where murders, drive-by shootings, and drug addiction were rampant.

"I tell people who grew up in Portland that things we see as tragic here, was everyday life [in Fresno]," said Ingram.

But Portland didn't prove to be a haven from violence for long. In the late 1980s, prominent California gangs transplanted their drug operations to Portland and Ingram's neighborhood changed dramatically, particularly following the influx of cheap crack cocaine. For a time, Ingram's own mother battled a cocaine addiction before eventually getting clean. She is now an ordained minister and a former college professor.

"I watched the gangs come in and set-up shop," said Ingram. "I saw this whole neighborhood get ravaged – and I saw the rebuilding."

## Wake-up calls

While his father was never in the picture, Ingram says he had uncles who served as authority figures, and he also got involved with Self Enhancement Inc., a youth outreach program in NE Portland. Nonetheless, Ingram hung out with known gang members, and it took a string of life-threatening situations to get his attention, including a high-speed car crash where he was pronounced dead at the scene before being revived.

"I kept finding myself in these really terrible situations and I kept getting out of them," said Ingram. "So the question I began to ponder in my heart, and later to God, was 'Why me? Why do you keep sparing my life?'"

"I'm looking [to help] the kid that isn't getting into any trouble yet, that's sitting there and trying to mind his own business, but has missed some key components in having a good, structured life."

**Rob Ingram '09**

Director of the City of Portland's Office of Youth Violence Prevention

had a close call himself when a bullet grazed his head during a gang shooting. However, Ingram – a devout Christian – believes God protected him for a greater purpose; namely, to bring about positive change in the lives of youth.

"[My upbringing] is a reality that I don't shy away from," said Ingram. "I did hang out with gang members and was involved in that lifestyle for some time, but I also had people [in my life] who said, 'Rob that is not you. You have the potential to live above this.'"

## Gang violence on the rise

Ingram took on his role at the city last year after previously working as the program director of the Blazers Boys and Girls Club, also in NE Portland.

Transition Team. He also travels to cities throughout the U.S. learning new strategies for addressing gang activity, as well as sharing his knowledge with communities that are only now seeing gangs emerge.

"[Between] 70 and 90 percent of our focus and energies target gang-affected youth, gang-affected families, and gang-affected neighbors, as well as young people who are in danger of falling into that lifestyle," said Ingram.

## In the thick of things

Raised by a single mother, Ingram spent half of his childhood in Fresno, Calif. before his mother relocated Ingram and his sister to Portland when Ingram was in seventh grade. In Fresno,

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## Everyday Hero

Portland TV station honors ADP graduate **Rhona Brant '07** for her work with teenage mothers.

As a youth development specialist with The Salvation Army White Shield Center, in NW Portland, **Rhona Brant '07** helps teenage mothers recovering from drug and alcohol abuse gain control of their lives. Last January, local television station KATU-Channel 2 honored Brant as an “Everyday Hero” with a news report about her work at the residential treatment facility, which serves young woman aged 12 to 18.

“I was a teen mom, myself,” said Brant, 39. “That’s why this job was such a perfect fit.”

White Shield provides clients a safe, structured environment where they can get clean and learn parenting and job skills. Brant oversees a volunteer mentorship program that allows teenaged clients to develop relationships with female role models in the community. Once matched, mentors and teenaged clients commit to meeting regularly for a year. Brant says the payoff can be pretty dramatic.



PHOTO COURTESY RHONA BRANT

**Rhona Brant '07** (left) was interviewed by KATU-Channel 2 news reporter Steve Dunn last January as part of an “Everyday Hero” segment. Brant runs a mentorship program for teenage mothers with The Salvation Army White Shield Center, in Portland.

“Two hours can make all of the difference,” said Brant. “I’ve seen lives changed on a daily basis through volunteerism.”

Brant recruits women volunteers through various community and professional organizations like the Oregon Women’s Lawyer Association and Kiwanas, and will even advertise on Craigslist. She says that, sadly, churches tend to be difficult places for her to find volunteers – a trend she would love to reverse.

“I know there are people in churches

who are willing,” said Brant. “The message isn’t getting through.”

Brant, the mother of four daughters aged 14 to 24, earned an associate’s degree in mental health and human services from Mt. Hood Community College before completing her bachelor’s degree in human development through WP’s Adult Degree Program in 2007.

“ADP was fantastic,” Brant said. “Being able to work full-time while maintaining a family. I appreciated it.”

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Ingram doesn’t use labels like “juvenile delinquents” or “at-risk youth” when he describes his work because he feels such terms put too much responsibility on children. He prefers, instead, the term “disconnected youth,” because it points to the broader familial, educational, and socio-economic systems that

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- ADP student **Rob Ingram '09**

should be sources of stability, but often are not. For its part, OYVP has provided a total of \$800,000 in grants to a handful of outreach programs in the city over the last two years.

“If we say a youth is disconnected, at what point did we lose connection with them? Was it in kindergarten? Was it in third grade?” asked Ingram. “I’m looking [to help] the kid that isn’t getting into any trouble yet, that’s sitting there and trying to mind his own business, but has missed some key components in having a good, structured life.”

#### A matter of degree

Ingram says people assume he has a college degree, given his position, but he worked a series of jobs instead during his twenties before landing at the Blazers Boys and Girls Club. He learned

about Warner Pacific through a number of alumni at his NE Portland church, The International Fellowship Family - in particular pastor **Steven Holt '91** and pastor-emeritus **James Coleman '61**. Ingram enrolled in the Associate of Arts in Organizational Dynamics Program at WP in 2006 and continued on to pursue his bachelor’s of business administration, which he will finish later this fall.

Ingram believes his degree will give him even more credibility in his work. And as a father of five children who regularly works 50-60 hours a week, the one-night-a-week ADP schedule was Ingram’s best option.

“It definitely helps me in my career, learning how people are wired, how we operate,” said Ingram. “I’m excited to get to school because I’m going to learn something that will help me the next day, even if it’s just to motivate my coworkers.”

#### Positive example

A sharp dresser, Ingram works hard to project a positive, professional image, particularly when he is back in his old neighborhood. He says the way he carries himself speaks volumes to youth in the inner city.

“I intentionally spend time in the community, dressed in professional attire, going about my business and making sure that the young kids are watching,” he said. “There is something to be said about young people seeing someone that looks like them presenting [himself] as a professional.”



Ingram