

“Now is the time,” by Ronnie Needham

The 22nd secret to all success: Give opportunity to everyone, especially to your employees, but also to others if possible.

That last secret led me to do something most people would not have dared.

Way back on the first day Byron worked for me, I asked him to bring over any gang leader he saw. At the Ford City Mall, gang members were very visible; many wore colors or had on a leather jacket. Byron probably thought I was crazy.

The first gang leader he brought over demanded, “What you want, man?”

I said, “I am only a guest in your mall. You are the boss, right?” He was only seventeen years old.

He said, “Yes. We are the Stone Nation.”

I said, “I will give you and your gang members any name you want for free. This is your cart now, and they are not allowed to steal from you.”

He asked, “What you mean by that?”

I told him, “Since you are the boss, all the things in the mall belong to you, including this cart.”

I could tell he liked what he was hearing.

I said, “You are the leader. When your people do a good job for you, you come and tell me. I will give their name to you, then you can give it to them. Is that fair?”

“Cool.” he said and smiled.

I did this with eight different gangs on that first day.

Byron shook his head and said, “You are the only white boy in the mall, but they like you.”

My cart was the only one never robbed at that mall. I had given them respect. Soon I would earn respect. God sent me to change their lives. As it played out, the gang members would

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protect me.

During my second week, there was a shooting in the mall. Two rival gangs were going at it. Everyone in Chicago had a gun, it seemed. They were about fifty yards away from me, shooting above the other side’s heads, busting out all the windows.

I was still making names while everyone else is ducking for cover. When it was over, Byron told me, “You ‘re one crazy white boy. Why didn’t you get down?”

I shrugged and said, “I am from Harlan County, Kentucky. I’m used to guns. By the way, they were just showing off a little, not trying to hit each other. Only busting out some glass.”

The following day, I told Bryon to go ask all the gang leaders to meet with me at my booth. Bryan had the respect of the gangs because he used to be a banger. He brought them over one at a time. Most were under nineteen years old.

I met with the crew leaders. I told them, “On Saturday morning, I am buying breakfast for all the gangs. Be at the food court at 8:30 a.m. I’ve got some important info to throw down. Breakfast is a time out. But no killing at breakfast. Okay?” All agreed.

Everyone was excited for the free breakfast, and they all committed to come with their crews. On Saturday, I brought with me twelve dozen Crispy Cream donuts, three gallons of milk, and some nice breakfast sandwiches, along with a boom box tape player.

The security guard was an enormous man everyone called Fat Tony. He was five- foot- eight and weighted over 320 pounds. Tony let us in early, for the half hour before the mall officially opened. About 75 kids showed up.

We all ate some doughnuts, then I said, “Hey, let’s jam out.” I plugged in a tape and played the song *WMCA* by The Village People. Close your eyes and just imagine being at the mall listening to that song with these kids.

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This may sound unusually but just for fun U-Tube the song WMCA by the Village people. Turn on the song then just close your eyes and listen now try to imagine being there in Chicago with these gangs these kid in 1993. And no one is shot of killed all this over music and food.

I told fat Tony, the message I wanted the kids to hear was the parts that said,

“Young man, there’s a place you can go. I say young man when your short on your doe, you can stay there, and I’m sure you will find many ways to have a good time.”

The mall could be their great place to go. It was great then and it is a great memory to this day. Perhaps the best thing I ever did in my life was to help these kids realized they were valuable.

They all took a timeout over food and music. And I think they got what I was trying to say.

When I’d turned on my jam box, Fat Tony had started to dance. I tell you; Fat Tony had some moves. The kids saw him getting down, and they all start dancing too—break dancing, line dancing, taking turns doing duels. For a minute they were just young kids having fun, no gangs, just 75 kids having a good time together.

When our half hour was up, I asked, “Hey, everyone! Do you want to do this again next Saturday?”

They all yelled, “Yes!”

I told them if there were no more shootings in the mall, we would have breakfast again next Saturday.

All the kids gave Fat Tony high fives.