

REMOVING WALLS THAT BLOCK TRUST

Corpus Christi's Terry Mills brings youth, police to summit for frank talk

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USA TODAY NETWORK

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TERRY MILLS

Location: Corpus Christi, Texas **Age:** 56 **Profession:** President, NAACP Corpus Christi chapter; Personal banking officer, Wells Fargo

Mission: I believe in helping people.



RACHEL DENNY CLOW/USA TODAY NETWORK

Terry Mills, president of the NAACP's Corpus Christi chapter, says the Youth Summit he organized in 2016 helped forge a better relationship between youth and law enforcement.

Terry Mills didn't want Corpus Christi to join the growing list of towns saddled with a reputation for unrest between law enforcement and young people.

Mills, like many black people living on the Texas Gulf Coast, was glued to his TV set watching clashes in 2016 with police and residents in places like Chicago and Baton Rouge.

Nothing like that ever played itself out in Corpus Christi, where he is president of the local NAACP chapter. But the potential always seemed to exist, Mills said, even in a bayside community dotted with refineries, fishing docks and taco restaurants.

So Mills set up the first Youth Summit in Corpus Christi. In April his efforts were recognized with the 2016 FBI Director's Community Leadership Award.

"If you're Hispanic, Muslim, black or other, you get pulled over (by the cops) and you have to throw your hands up in the air. I'm like 'This is crazy. ... this is not the America

that I know,' ” Mills said. “I got tired of seeing that throughout the United States. I said we need to come together as one. I want to get in front of a problem before something erupts, instead of being behind the problem after it already (has) taken place.”

The summit, held in September, brought teens from all over Texas’ Coastal Bend under the same roof with police officers, lawyers from the U.S. Attorney’s Office and even FBI agents. The aim was to help guide youths on how to make good decisions.

Topics ran the gamut, from civil rights and cyber security, to gang violence and establishing better police community relations. There also were discussions on bullying.

Talk was frank. But Mills said the dialogue was necessary to build relationships and head off “us vs. them” division.

“We need to work smarter and not harder,” Mills said. “All I care about is fairness. I still believe in America. I still believe that in Corpus Christi you’ve got some like-minded people that want to see things better for everybody. It doesn’t matter if you’re gay, it doesn’t matter if you’re black, white. Just be fair.”

Q& A WITH TERRY MILLS

What does it mean to you to be an American?

“I love America. America to me means ... when Miss Liberty said ‘bring me your tired, bring me your this, bring me your that. That’s the America I know. I realize that we’re different. And that people see America different. But you know what? I’d rather live in America than live in some Third World country,

because you don’t have the freedom to vote. You don’t have the freedom to do this, to do that. And here in America, we have that. We sometimes take it for granted. But we have that right, under the Constitution, to voice that opinion, whether its verbally, on paper, protesting. That’s America.”

What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?

“I got tired of minority kids getting pulled over by cops. Or if you get pulled over and you don’t do what they say or you say the wrong thing, you might get beat up to death. Or you might get shot. That doesn’t happen in Corpus Christi. That happens in other places. But I got tired of seeing that throughout the United States. I just said we need to come together as one.”

What gives you hope?

“What gives me hope ... is that I know that one day all this hatred that’s going on — all the dissatisfaction, all the killing, all the rape and all that stuff — in my America, that’s all going to be gone. And we can all get along. Not just get along to get along, but to get along and mean it.”

What concerns you?

“My concerns are we can forget about prejudice, we can forget about hatred, we can forget things that set us off. We all have differences with how things are being done

and how the country is being run. But I'm hoping that God is going to touch the hearts of these people who are making these decisions for America."

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

"We sometimes need to change the way we perceive things. People don't realize that just by talking to someone ... by giving you words of encouragement, you can change a person's paradigm. You can change a person's whole way of thinking."