



AT THE INTERSECTION  
OF HERITAGE, FAITH,  
& COMMUNITY

Partners for Sacred Places

## *Toll the Bell*

*A city-wide sound installation presented by Penn Live Arts  
in collaboration with*

*The Office of the Chaplain, Interfaith Philadelphia, and Partners for Sacred Places*

### **Background**

The City of Philadelphia is experiencing an unprecedented level of gun violence. In 2021, 506 Philadelphians were victims of fatal shootings, and an additional 1,831 Philadelphians were injured in non-fatal shootings. The number of people murdered by guns in Philadelphia increased by 63% from 2017 to 2022, relative to only a 1.6% increase in population. Similarly, over the last decade, the United States has experienced a massive increase in this form of violence. In 2022, over 44k Americans were killed and an over 38k injured in incidents related to gun violence. In fact, since 2017, the U.S. has experienced a 19% increase in the number of deaths and 22% increase in the number of injuries from guns.

This data, coupled with the increased frequency of mass shooting events and the disproportionate impact on communities of color, centers gun violence as one of the most important challenges facing our city and our country. In 2013, 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton was killed by a stray bullet on the streets of Chicago just days after performing at former President Obama's inauguration. In response, her friends launched the #WearOrange campaign and National Gun Violence Awareness Day. On June 4th, 2022, one day after Philadelphia came together to commemorate National Gun Violence Awareness Day, three people were killed and another eleven injured in a shooting on Fourth and South Street.

On the first Friday in June, and the weekend immediately following, people across the country wear orange to honor Hadiya and other victims of gun violence; using the traditional hunter's color of orange to draw attention to this national issue. As the City attempts to mitigate the impact of this perpetual violence, **Penn Live Arts looks to use the arts as a catalyst for positive social change and as a platform to advocate for a safer Philadelphia.**

### **The Problem**

Despite the prevalence of daily homicides and their impacts on diverse Philadelphia communities, most residents are only generally aware of these statistics. Mass shooting events in large public areas like Center City draw more media attention, while despite the frequency of gun violence incidents in other areas - specifically in neighborhoods composed primarily of people of color - these events go largely unnoticed by many Philadelphia residents.

Across Philadelphia, there are several advocacy groups for common sense gun reform, including many who participate in the #WearOrange campaign and National Gun Violence Awareness Day. To date, there has yet to be any coordinated event in Philadelphia which seeks to raise widespread acknowledgment of this issue while using the arts as a medium to convey urgency and awareness.

### **Project Overview**

Historically, church bells have been used as a tool for calling a religious community together, marking the time of day or night, but also to warn residents of impending danger – a coming storm, a hostile threat – and as an aural device to promote contemplation. This use of sound as a call to action is also seen outside of religious traditions. For example, every year on Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel, air raid sirens sound for two minutes and citizens stop what they are doing to participate in silent reflection. In a similar way, the sound of the bell in our project will serve as an experiential catalyst both for the individual who hears it and for the community at large who experiences this sonic device collectively.

**Toll the Bell is a sound installation activating sounds meaningful to communities of faith throughout Philadelphia, particularly Center City, West Philadelphia, and North Philadelphia, simultaneously and for a sustained period, presented by Penn Live Arts and a diverse group of Philadelphia-based community partners. On June 7, 2024, this collective sound-generating will commemorate and mourn victims of gun violence and spotlight the efforts of organizations working in areas of prevention and healing.**

### **Project Day**

At noon on June **7th, 2024**, participating churches and organizations will commence bell ringing and other sonic devices, for **10.6 minutes** to represent 106 people killed by a firearm in the United States every day. ([Source CDC 5-year gun death injuries stats](#))

**Participant sites will be open for quiet reflection, prayer, and meditation.** PLA staff will be on hand to pass out a project description with links to more information on gun violence prevention and programs working for change in Philadelphia and nationally.

### **Participant Requirements**

PLA seeks partners who wish to participate in making an impact in Philadelphia for the prevention of gun violence. There is no cost for participating organizations, but they should be able to contribute through a sonic device and by making their space available to the public for one hour on June 7th. In addition:

- For church sites, the Toll the Bell project requires working church bells or a digital recording that can make a sustained sound by an experienced operator.
- For other sites, a reading, recording, or traditional sound may be contributed.
- Participating sites will allow PLA staff to hand out project description flyers.
- Participants agree to be listed in all press and marketing materials.
- Participants agree to make their space open to all Philadelphians regardless of race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, creed, national or ethnic origin, citizenship status, age, disability, veteran status, or any other legally protected class.

## **List of Confirmed Partners & Supporters (as of 15 February 2024)**

### **West Philadelphia - University City**

- University Lutheran, 3637 Chestnut St
- Tabernacle United, 3700 Chestnut St
- St. Agatha-St. James Roman Catholic Church, 3728 Chestnut St
- St. Mary's at Penn Episcopal, 3916 Locust Walk
- Episcopal Cathedral, 19 S 38th St
- Penn Campus Carillon, Locust Walk
- Penn Office of Government & Community Affairs
- Penn Office of the Chaplain
- Netter Center
- Penn Injury Science Center

### **West Philadelphia - Cedar Park**

- St. Francis De Sales Catholic Church, 4625 Springfield

### **West Philadelphia - Haverford North**

- Calvary-St. Augustine Episcopal Church, 814 N 41st St
- St. Ignatius of Loyola Church, 636 N 43rd St

### **North Philadelphia**

- St. Nicholas Eastern Orthodox Church, 817 N 7th St
- Temple University LenFest Circle, 1801 Broad St.
- Temple University Community Gateway, 1510 Cecil B. Moore Ave
- Norris Square Neighborhood Project, 2141 N Howard St
- EMIR Healing Center, 59 E Haines St
- Philly PAAN (Philadelphia Anti-Drug Anti-Vioence Network), 2700 N 17th St #200
- Taller Puertorriqueno, Inc., 2600 N 5th St

### **Center City - Logan Square**

- The Academy of Natural Sciences, 1900 Benjamin Franklin Pkwy

### **Center City - Rittenhouse Square**

- Church of the Holy Trinity, 1904 Walnut St
- Partners for Sacred Places, 1700 Sansom St

### **Old City**

- Christ Church, 20 N American St
- Arch Street Meeting House, 320 Arch St
- St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church, 243 N Lawrence St.

### **Greater Philadelphia Area**

- Trinity Lutheran Church, 1000 W Main St, Lansdale
- The Church of Good Shepherd, 1116 W Lancaster Ave, Bryn Mawr
- Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia
- Interfaith Philadelphia
- Heeding God's Call to End Gun Violence
- Anti-Violence Partnership of Philadelphia
- Cranaleith Spiritual Center, 13475 Proctor Rd

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# Penn Live Arts: Toll the Bell

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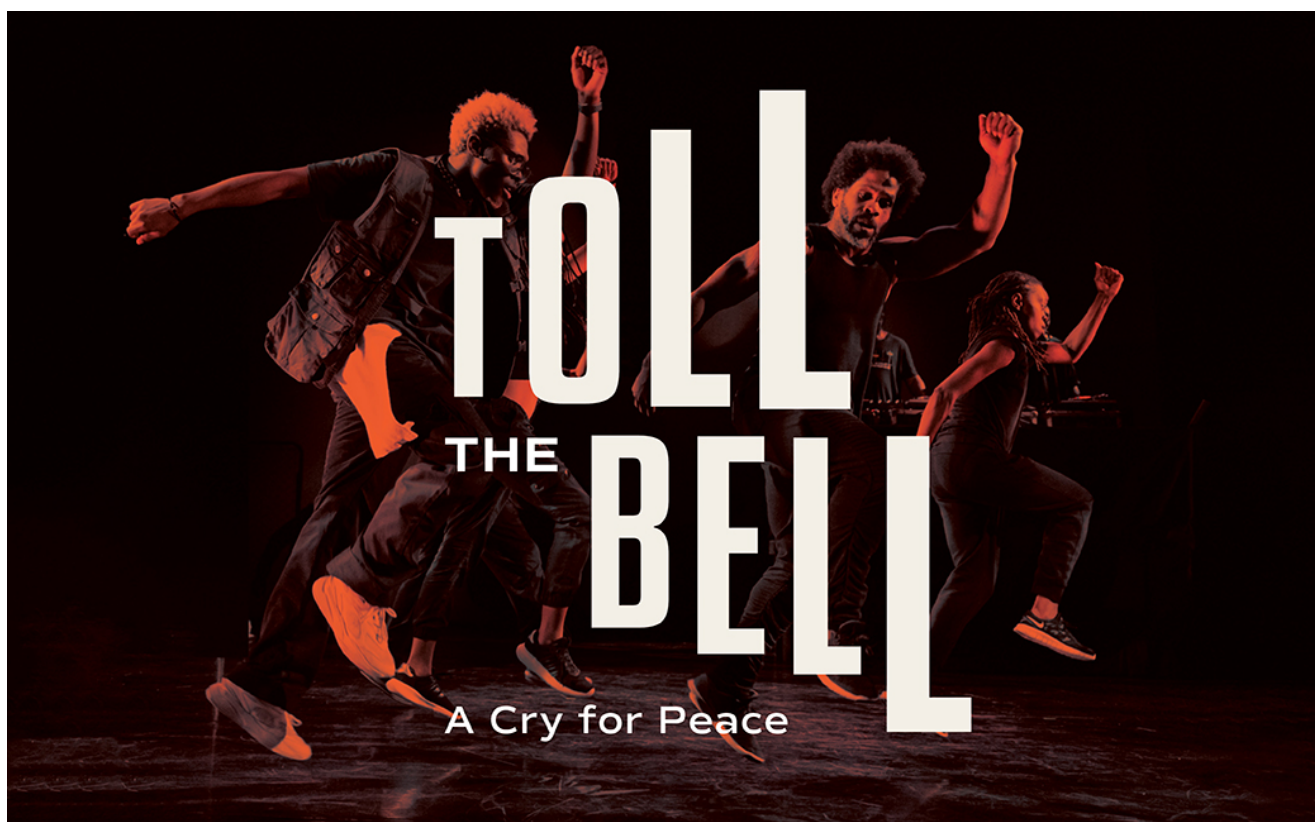
PLA [pennlivearts.org/blog/toll-the-bell](https://pennlivearts.org/blog/toll-the-bell)

## Toll the Bell

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Christopher A. Gruits

Posted October 12, 2023



When we curate each annual season, we balance a range of ideas, objectives, and program goals, including our ongoing commitment to artists that address topical issues of our time. Programs at the Annenberg Center have always dealt with pressing issues of the day, whether it be through August Wilson's plays, campus-wide artist residencies, or commissions of new work such as the 2017 world premiere of *A Period of Animate Existence*. Our aim each year is to provide audiences with a range of performances that delight, entertain, challenge, and inspire, and we know that so many of our artists are telling important stories that help us, as the audience, reflect and consider our world differently.

In planning for this year, we considered how we could support artists who were grappling with the American tragedy of gun violence. Anyone in the Philly metro area would be hard pressed to ignore the daily reports of incessant gun-related injury and death in our city, while

also seeing a regular stream of news about random shooting events and other tragedies throughout our country. It's become so common place as to be a regular fixture on many daily news reports and personally, I find the statistics overwhelming. When I reflected on this issue, I realized that despite living in Philadelphia, I had a very limited understanding of the impact on certain communities and what work was being done to help mitigate this epidemic. How could PLA give voice to those who have been deeply affected and at the same time, how could we uplift organizations and community efforts that are working to improve conditions, prevent violence, and heal neighborhoods? How could we do this through the performing arts?

Working with two important companies – one theatre ensemble and one dance group – PLA will present a range of programs that bring awareness to the issue of gun violence, while honoring the victims of this tragedy. A primary driver for us is supporting and uplifting local organizations that have been doing work to help our communities mitigate this tragedy. This season's theme is timely, and these artists are addressing it head-on with their own interpretation, perspective, and lived experience. The project culminates with a major city-wide sound installation called Toll the Bell on June 7, 2024, National Gun Violence Awareness Day.

### **The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC)**

Many of you joined us last year for programs that were part of our Brownstein Residency for Artistic Innovation with the dynamic Negro Ensemble Company. NEC created a one-act play festival in the fall of 2022 and performed the world premiere of our commissioned work, *Mecca is Burning*, inviting audiences to experience a dramatization of the love, anger, and sorrow surrounding the gentrification of Harlem, a community in change. With the company's return this year, we asked Karen Brown, NEC's Artistic Director, to consider creating work that centered the community's perspective on gun violence and we'll see the result of this in late October with the world premiere of two one-act plays by Cynthia Grace Robinson and Mona Washington. In February, the company will return with a new production of *Zooman and the Sign* by Philadelphia's own Charles Fuller, the Pulitzer® Prize-winning author of *A Soldier's Play*. NEC actually premiered *Zooman* off-Broadway back in 1980. PLA will be partnering with facilitators to offer audience members a chance to engage more deeply in this work and its themes.

### **Rennie Harris Puremovement**

Last spring, we announced a major residency with the outstanding artist Rennie Harris, funded by the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, the first multi-year residency at Penn Live Arts and the first artistic home base for this internationally renowned Philadelphia artist. Rennie grew up in North Philadelphia, developed a unique interpretation of hip-hop dance, and has addressed many pressing issues such as urban gun violence, gang violence, and other

themes through his work for many years. In the first season of his residency, his program will include a retrospective of works that helped catapult his company to the world stage, including *Students of the Asphalt Jungle*, *March of the Antman* and *P-Funk*.

In conjunction with Rennie's main stage work, we'll be partnering with schools in both West and North Philadelphia to make connections with students around their perspective on gun violence in their own communities and how they can react to and process their experiences through the medium of dance.

### **Toll the Bell**

These programs are dynamic and provide audiences with diverse perspectives on this pressing issue. However, we also wanted to create a two-part opportunity, one that would allow all Philadelphians to reflect on how gun violence impacts our city while also amplifying the vital work of many anti-violence organizations.

On **June 7, 2024**, PLA will present a city-wide sound installation, partnering with Penn's Office of the Chaplain, Interfaith Philadelphia, and many churches, synagogues, mosques, and other community partners to ring bells and make other sounds for 10.6 minutes. These ten minutes and six seconds represent the 106 Americans killed daily through gun violence and serve as a call to action, a warning, and a sonic device to disrupt the environment for Philadelphians, inviting them to stop, reflect, and learn more about this tragic issue. Sound has always been used to alert communities to danger, warn of an impending disaster, or to call neighbors together to share in moments of reflection, worship, or celebration. Truly, no city in America is more connected to the imagery, history, and symbolism of the bell than Philadelphia; through this sonic mechanism, we hope to uplift those individuals and organizations in our city that are working to change conditions and circumstances for the better.

Toll the Bell is not a profile of tragedy, but rather a call to action – a literal ringing of the bell – to honor our fellow citizens who have lost their lives and raise awareness for those working to have a positive impact in our city. A project of this type requires a tremendous amount of coordination and persistence. We have been working diligently with partners to create a moment for our city that inspires, challenges, and leverages the unique and important work that communities of faith and other neighborhood organizations have been doing to mitigate this tragedy.

As we move through the year, we'll be sharing more information on how you can participate and engage with this issue through the performing arts. I encourage you to join us for one of these amazing programs in our theatres and on June 7, my great hope is that you'll be with me outside, listening and reflecting to the sound of warning, the call to action, and the intrinsic wish for change.

## **related events**

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- Negro Ensemble Company
- Rennie Harris Puremovement American Street Dance Theatre

## **related event**

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Negro Ensemble Company



# Mapping our Philadelphia experience

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PLA [pennlivearts.org/blog/mapping-our-philadelphia-experience](https://pennlivearts.org/blog/mapping-our-philadelphia-experience)

**PENN LIVE ARTS**  
*UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA*

## Penn Live Arts Blog

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Leah Falk

Posted February 5, 2024



Photo by Mark Garvin

We all use maps to help orient ourselves in space, navigate an area, or learn more about what's around us. But maps can also be a source of stories about a place – and, as participants at two special events learned last week, the information available on a map can

suggest a story that either contradicts or complements individuals' lived experience. In that tension lives the possibility for a creative, human-driven use of maps – the often complex, messy rejoinders to dominant narratives about a city.

Over two evenings at the Penn Libraries, 24 participants joined our education and engagement team for the Map Table, a kickoff community engagement event for Toll the Bell, our season-long focus on the ongoing gun violence crisis. Located in the Research Data and Digital Scholarship room at Van Pelt Library, these events were co-facilitated by geospatial data librarians Girmaye Misgna and Ben Liebersohn as well as Public Digital Scholarship Librarian Cynthia Heider. Welcoming participants from faith-based organizations across the city as well as community leaders, Misgna and Liebersohn opened with an introduction to the many types of data that can be projected onto a map of Philadelphia: SEPTA bus and subway routes, median household income, racial and ethnic demographic information, redlining history, Strava walking routes and more. Such data can create cultural profiles of communities as well as a general sense of affluence or being under-resourced.

From there, participants were invited to add their own annotations, stories and legends to blank maps of Philadelphia neighborhoods, contributing to what geographers call “human geography.” Participants from Norris Square Neighborhood Project, Calvary Episcopal Church, EMIR Healing Center and elsewhere immediately got to work discussing daily routines – the regional rail and bus combinations teenagers took to work, the landmarks where people worked and went to school – as well as history. The site of the former studio where *American Bandstand* was filmed received an annotation, as did the site of the MOVE bombing, in the margin of the West Philadelphia map. Favorite restaurants, places to celebrate a birthday and soothing community gardens appeared. One participant outlined the bus route of a relative who worked for SEPTA. Teenagers pointed out their schools, the community centers where they worked and their sometimes-long journeys home.

When we returned to observe each other's annotations, we also examined a heat map of shootings in Philadelphia. How, we asked, did such a map feel related to the work participants had done adding their own stories, marking the city with their daily lives, memories, families, work and routines? One woman noted that although she was acutely aware of the atmosphere just north of her community organization's headquarters, one of the areas marked most densely with violence, she had annotated the blank maps only with what felt familiar and normal to her, not with traumatic incidents. A young man noted that the places he marked as feeling most at home, or most in community, were also close to the coordinates marked most violent on the heat map. How could it be that a place whose data branded it as dangerous felt safe to him?

“Kids don’t have to grow up the way I did,” a church leader said, “but I want them to be safe.” Teenage participants talked about their public transit routes to school and work, how they noticed unsafe conditions and tried to stay focused, but still worried about children younger than themselves, their possible encounters with an unstable person or an abandoned needle. Participants immediately grew wise to the ways their detailed, personal contributions to the maps complicated the narrative that someone might construe about a particular neighborhood given only the shooting data. Normalcy, community, work, family and celebration became the disrupters of a story about violence, rather than the other way around. The heat map might have suggested a besieged city; survival told differently.

In the coming weeks, PLA and library staff will prepare to transfer the map annotations to a digital, interactive map, not unlike a My Google Map, on which anyone can contribute. During the next few months, participants at partner organizations and worship communities will be able to add their landmarks and stories to a map that will also include partners for our June 7 Toll the Bell sound installation. As bells ring on that day, we hope that curious bystanders will peruse this collectively generated map, one that acknowledges the city’s traumas and challenges but is ultimately overwhelmed by life.