Always on My Mind

David Kennedy's obsession with drug dealers has made him a highly sought-after criminologist.

The image of a drug dealer driving a Mercedes is a Hollywood favorite, so maybe it's not surprising that the African-American preacher, speaking on a panel about how to shut down urban drug markets, went for the cliché. It's hard to get the dealers off the corners and into straight jobs, said the preacher, since selling drugs pays so well. A voice piped up. "This is not true," said David Kennedy. "They're scraping by, living at home." Kennedy offered advice: when confronting dealers who say they're getting rich, tell them, "I'm calling bulls——."

Kennedy is a rail-thin white man with weary eyes, a goatee and hair down his back; he resembles country singer Willie Nelson. He has never been a cop, and, as one friend says, he "looks more like a biker than a professor." He has no Ph.D. or masters in criminology; he studied philosophy as a Swarthmore undergrad. But in the hotel ballroom packed with police and U.S. Justice Department officials, everyone was listening—because Kennedy is the only person who has ever come up with a consistently viable (and cost-effective) strategy for helping the inner city with its chronic blight and shame, the dope dealer on the corner.

Kennedy's classroom has been the street. As a researcher for Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, he spent years in the rough neighborhoods of cities like Houston, Los Angeles and Boston. He watched the same sad pattern: locked and loaded, cops would repeatedly kick down doors—or make undercover buys to catch dealers. The locals began viewing the police the way residents of Tikrit saw the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division in the summer of 2003: as an occupying army. Very few of these residents were dealers and even fewer were violent, but many people subscribed to the "don't snitch" ethos that made it difficult for the cops to make cases.

In a 2004 experiment in High Point, N.C., Kennedy got the cops to try a new way of cleaning up the corners. They rounded up some...
Murdoch’s Last Laugh
Johnnie L. Roberts | Dec 5, 2008
Just a year after buying The Wall Street Journal, the press rapscallion has revitalized the fusty paper.