

# WASH OUT THESE DIRTY SHIRTS



ELMER SMITH

**B**ILAL QAYYUM did a double take and came to a dead stop outside a display window on Chestnut Street.

Staring back at him from the window of the Center City T-shirt and gear shop was a message he couldn't walk away from in good conscience. "It showed two cops talking to a young guy at a table," Qayyum recalled. "Under the picture it said 'Don't be a snitch.'"

Inside, shirts with similar messages were displayed prominently. One showed Al Pacino in a scene from "Scarface" trussed up and apparently about to be tortured by a police interrogator. Others simply said "Don't talk to the police" in bold letters.

But why get into a lather about a T-shirt, I asked Qayyum. What follows was the answer I expected. "This negates what we're try-

ing to do to stop violence," he said. He was just warming up.

"Men United is telling people to turn in guns, and cooperate with police if you know some of these perpetrators killing people on the streets. Then we see this stuff telling kids that the police are the enemy. To me it's a moral issue in our community. I can't sit back and let this kind of message go out without saying something to . . ."

After a bit, he remembered who he was talking to and conceded that we had a similar street code when we were growing up in West Philly.

"But we weren't promoting the idea that cops were our enemies," he reminded me. "Our code was about snitching on each other in school.

"Besides, we didn't have all these killings then. What are we supposed to say to the mother of a dead child whose killer is still at large while other kids are running around wearing this stuff?"

The T-shirts, manufactured by a Virginia firm called Starco, a division of Headgear Sportswear, do take one giant step over the line that separates the in-your-face attitude we expect in teenagers from a potentially dan-



gerous message.

These shirts take a much more ominous tone. The ones I saw displayed feature the sight you'd see through the scope of a sniper's rifle.

I bought one with the seemingly harmless "Stop Snitchin" in bold letters across the front. But the back carried the real message in white lettering: "RIP." Rest in Peace.

Jeff Watson, president of the

Virginia firm, did not return my call when I told his general manager that the shirts had become an issue in Philadelphia. They were more cooperative at the store on Chestnut Street.

A man who would identify himself only as "Tony, I'm the manager" was already feeling the heat by the time I walked in.

"We're getting rid of them right away," he told me Monday. "People were here complaining."

He said the shirts had been selling briskly. "In Baltimore and Washington, it was a hot seller," Tony the manager told me. "But we don't need this kind of publicity."

I checked later in the day and found the shirts hidden behind some other stock on the same racks. But by yesterday, they had been removed from the shelves at all three of the chain's stores and boxed for return.

"The police commissioner's son, Steve, is a friend of mine," Tony told me yesterday. "He came in and asked us, too. So we took them out right away."

Qayyum wasn't surprised. "The commissioner was ready to march with us as soon as he heard about it," Qayyum said.

"Other stores got approached but they wouldn't touch it. They understand our problem here."

Momi Nechemia, owner of the Chestnut Street store, does too, after talking to Qayyum.

"He is Israeli," Qayyum said. "I asked how would it look in Israel if you had guys wearing these after a suicide bombing. His eyes got wide. He finally got it. He agrees with us now." ★

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