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Information in this article, originally published May 31, was corrected June 3. The Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle is planning to convert the former Colman School into apartments. A previous version of this story said the league was planning condominiums.

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Kelly says he's been the target of threats

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James Kelly said he has received constant threats since he became president of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle three years ago. In recent months, many had a common theme: opposition to the Urban League's plan to renovate the former **Colman School** into apartments and an African-American heritage **museum**.

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Kelly said his lifelong crusade against violence — his father was killed two months before he was born — increasingly collided with fears for his family's safety. He won't answer his door at night.

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Those fears may have led Kelly to make one of the most critical decisions of his civic career: to routinely carry a gun.



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Seattle police are investigating whether Kelly flashed a holstered pistol during an argument with three men at Rainier Beach High **School** on Wednesday night. Kelly has a permit to carry a concealed weapon, but bringing a gun onto **school** grounds, even with a permit, is a gross misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in jail.

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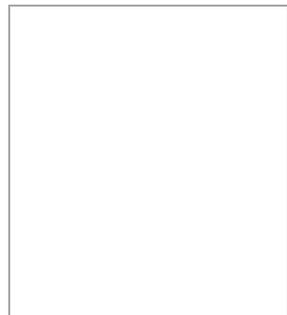
[Corrections](#)

Police also are investigating whether the men may have threatened Kelly after the meeting about support for South End schools.

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One of the men involved in the incident was Kwame Garrett, 25, son of Omari Tahir-Garrett, who was not part of the altercation.



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Omari Tahir-Garrett opposes the Urban League's plans for the property. He was one of the activists who occupied **Colman** in 1985 to force the city to build a cultural center there. He claims to be the true leader of the African-American **museum**, and he rejects Kelly's ideas for apartments and a scaled-down **museum** on the site.

Last summer, Tahir-Garrett was charged with assault for allegedly slamming then-Mayor Paul Schell in the face with a megaphone. A King County Superior Court jury was unable to reach a verdict May 9, and prosecutors have announced their intention to retry him.

Kwame Garrett said that when he saw Kelly on Wednesday night, he asked challenging questions about the Urban League's plan to "steal" **Colman** from his father.

Kelly said he felt increasingly frightened during the conversation. He said Tahir-Garrett's alleged assault on Schell flashed through his mind. "These guys were going to jump me," Kelly said yesterday. "I didn't want to get jumped and assaulted. At that point, I said enough is enough."

Police crossed out names from a report on the incident released yesterday, but an officer wrote that a handgun was displayed.

Kelly wouldn't disclose details about when he decided to carry a gun and said his wife didn't know he had one. He said he was deeply committed to nonviolence and child safety. In 1992, he was president of Stop the Violence, which sponsored a gun buy-back program.

But his reluctance to arm himself changed, he said, when people threatened his family.

"It's the worst situation to be in," said Kelly. "That night fear became reality."

The altercation is the latest refrain in a decades-long controversy over the future of **Colman**, a dispute that has touched dozens of public and private figures.

Former Mayor Norm Rice, an Urban League board member, said Kelly would be justified in carrying a weapon. And Rice lays the blame for the increased tension on Tahir-Garrett and others involved in his group's effort to renovate **Colman**.



"The nature of the anger and frustration of some people who have a different vision of **Colman School** has reached a point that is beyond reason," Rice said.

Rice said he knew Kelly and others had received threats over the Urban League's plans for **Colman**. And the assault on Schell reaffirmed for him that the threats should be taken seriously.

"It would be another story if someone assaulted him (Kelly) badly," said Rice. "One has to think about their safety."

Tahir-Garrett could not be reached for comment yesterday, but one of his supporters said no one from their group had threatened Kelly.



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"He's trying to put a spin on it like we're a threat because he's in the wrong (about **Colman**)," said Earl Debnam, who was a squatter in the empty **school** for eight years to bring attention to the **museum** effort. "He's operating in a paranoid state because he's trying to steal something."

In 1985, Tahir-Garrett, Debnam and other activists broke into **Colman** to force public officials to turn the building into an black-history **museum**. Eight years later, Rice agreed to convene a committee that eventually formed the board of the African American Heritage **Museum** and Cultural Center.

In 1998, Tahir-Garrett was removed from the board for threatening other members. He later formed his own board by the same name. The confusion between the two boards led the city to cut off funding to the project.

A year later, attorney James Fearn, head of one of the boards, said he was punched in the face by a supporter of Tahir-Garrett's during a reconciliation meeting at New Hope Baptist Church. The blow knocked the glasses off his face, said Fearn, who filed a police report.

Seattle City Councilman Richard McIver said Tahir-Garrett threatened him during a housing-committee meeting March 29. He said Tahir-Garrett was upset because the Urban League was going to develop the Coleman property.

"He directly threatened me," McIver said. "The attitude was 'We're going to get you,' " McIver said.

Kelly said he prayed with his wife and minister as the threats escalated. He feared that he might share the fate of former Urban League president Edwin Pratt, who was killed by a shotgun blast after he answered the door of his Shoreline home Jan. 26, 1969. No one has been charged in the slaying.

"As much as we love **Colman**, there is a constant fear," Kelly said.

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