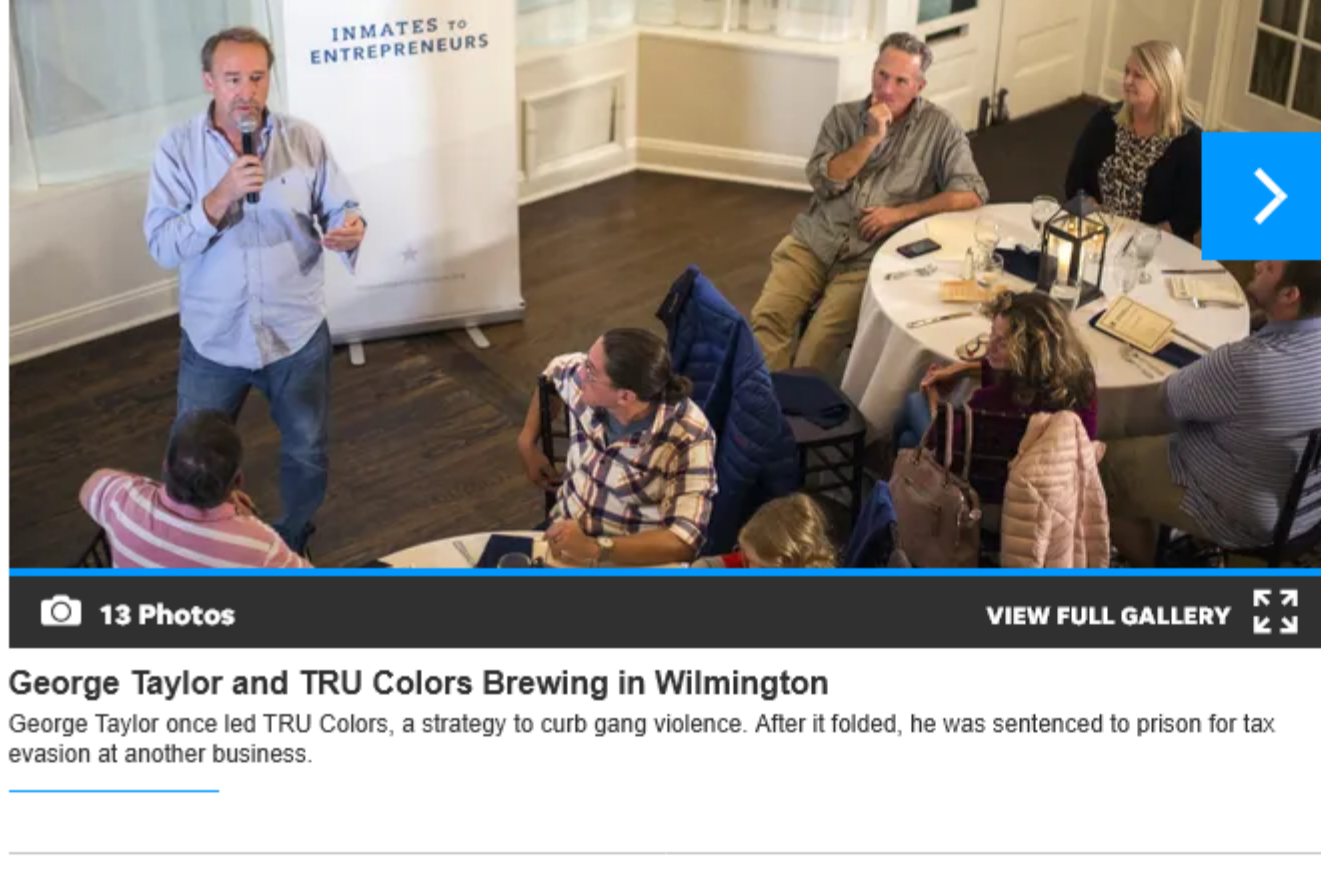


LOCAL

Three years later, what has Wilmington learned from the failure of TRU Colors Brewing?

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Wilmington StarNews
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George Taylor and TRU Colors Brewing in Wilmington
George Taylor once led TRU Colors, a strategy to curb gang violence. After it folded, he was sentenced to prison for tax evasion at another business.

Key Points AI-assisted summary

- George Taylor, founder of TRU Colors brewery, is currently serving a prison sentence for tax evasion.
- TRU Colors, a brewery that employed active gang members, shut down in 2022 after a series of setbacks, including a deadly shooting involving employees.
- While some argue that TRU Colors provided valuable skills and opportunities for its employees, others believe it was poorly conceived and ultimately harmful to the community.
- The closure of TRU Colors has led to questions about the effectiveness of high-profile anti-violence programs and whether they can truly address the root causes of crime.
- Some community leaders believe that smaller, community-based initiatives like Sokoto House offer a more effective approach to violence prevention.

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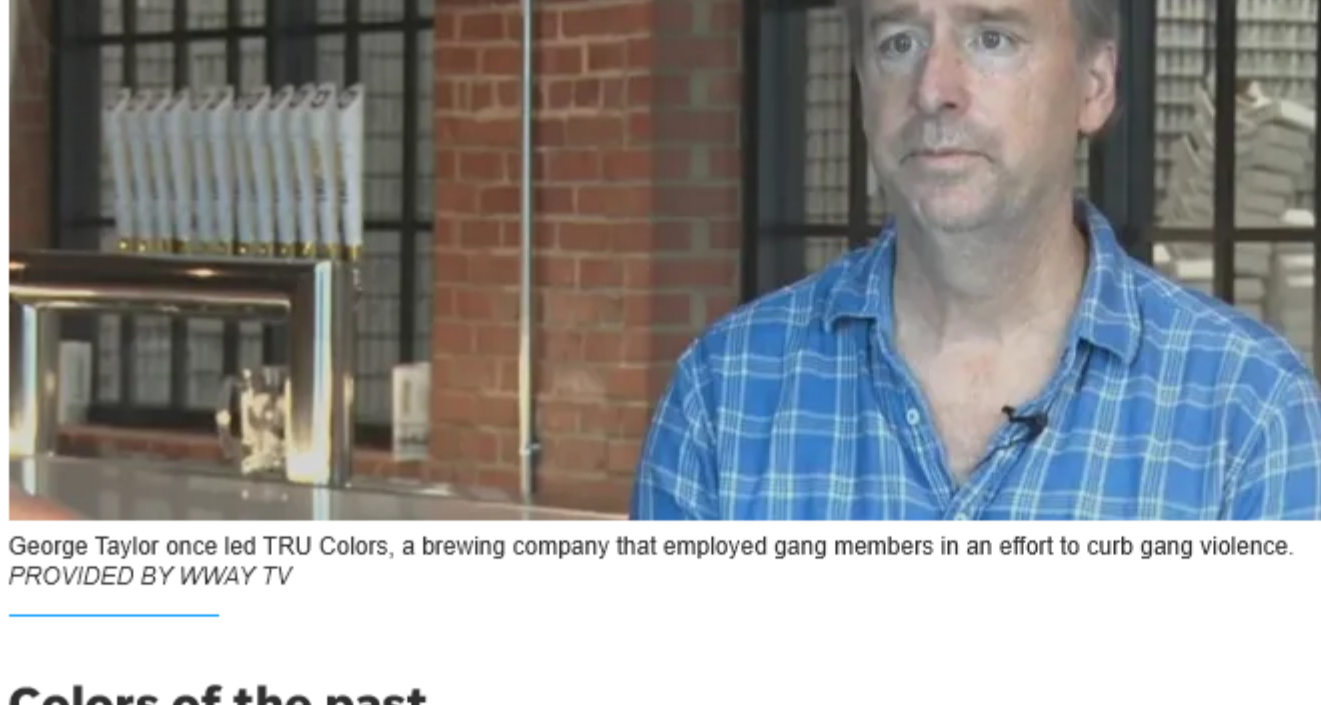
These days, George Taylor answers to the inmate number 31663-511 at the Federal Correctional Institution, Williamsburg, a medium-security prison with an adjacent minimum-security facility in Salters, South Carolina, about halfway between Georgetown and Columbia.

A Wilmington-based entrepreneur, Taylor is known for launching such successful start-ups as the UnTappd and Next Glass beer-and-wine-rating apps. But he's probably best-known for TRU Colors, the Greenfield Street brewery/business/social experiment billed as being partly run by competing Wilmington gang members, with some 70 active gang members employed there at the company's peak. After a deadly 2021 shooting involving brewery employees and a raft of critical news coverage, TRU Colors shut down in 2022.

For Taylor, the bad news didn't end there.

In November 2024, Taylor was sentenced to a year in federal prison for evading more than \$2 million in taxes between 2014 and 2021 as chairman and president of National Speed, a high-performance automotive services business. Taylor will be incarcerated for much if not the remainder of 2025.

But while Taylor's Wilmington story might be over, at least for the time being, one question remains unanswered: What did Wilmington learn from the TRU Colors experiment?



George Taylor once led TRU Colors, a brewing company that employed gang members in an effort to curb gang violence. PROVIDED BY WWAY TV

Colors of the past

Taylor started working on the concept that would become TRU Colors in 2016. He told the StarNews that a 2015 Castle Street shooting that left a 16-year-old boy dead inspired him to investigate ways to lessen incidents of street violence in Wilmington.

As Taylor said during a talk at the Wilmington Business Journal's Power Breakfast Series in December 2022, he eventually determined that "street violence is driven by a lack of economic opportunity."

Taylor was already involved with the alcohol industry through the apps his companies created, and he settled on the idea of starting a brewery that would hire rival gang members, almost all of them young Black men. Taylor would give them salaries, training in business and/or beer-making, and promote the workers who showed promise or initiative to higher positions with more responsibility. It was, at least in concept, a for-profit social mission.

According to a 2022 story in The New Yorker about TRU Colors by Charles Bethea, in forming the TRU Colors business model Taylor consulted with Los Angeles-based Jesuit priest Greg Boyle, who created the nonprofit Homeboy Industries to train former gang members to work in various businesses.

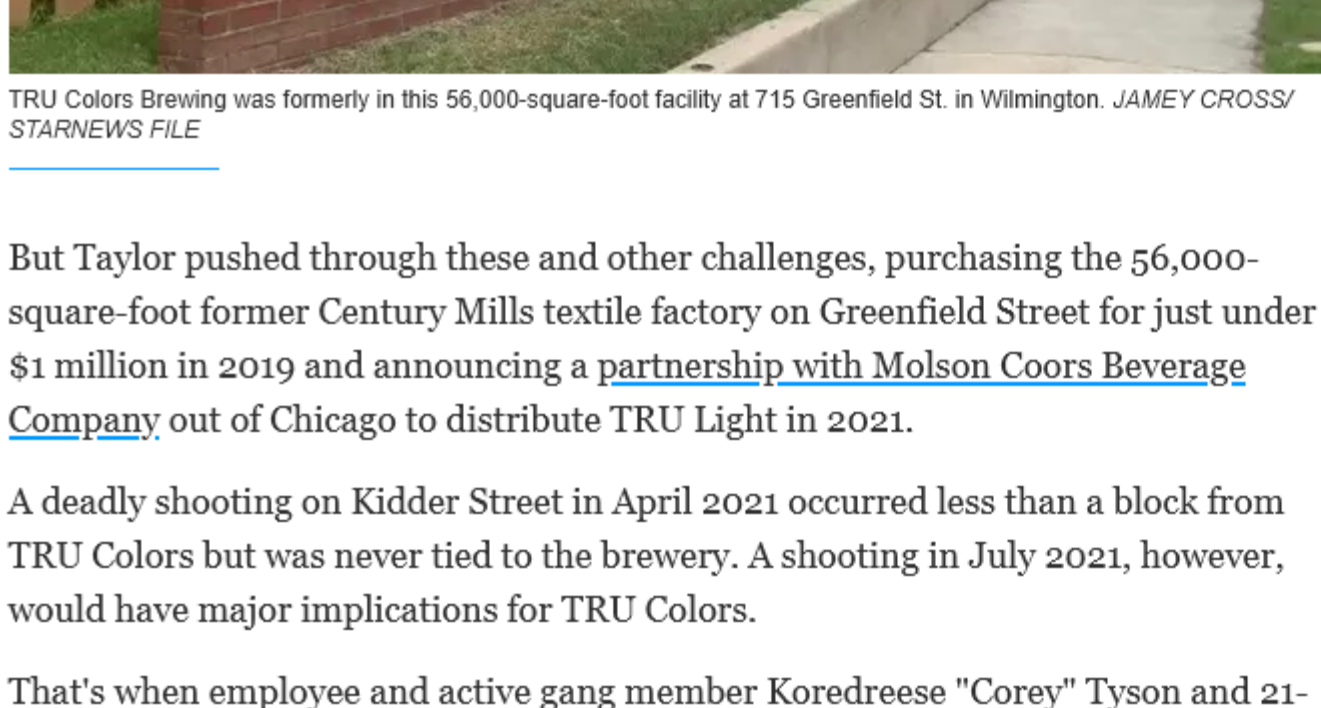
But in talking with the podcast Brewbound, which covers the brewing industry, in 2022, Bethea said Taylor "shrugged off the advice of experts," including Boyle, by encouraging TRU Colors employees to also be active gang members who by definition were participating in illegal activities.

"I think a lot of it had to do with marketing," Bethea told Brewbound. "The idea of doing something involving active rival gang members hadn't been done before. It's more bold and unprecedented and frankly, it's gonna elicit a lot more press and attention than doing what has been done before and what's been somewhat successful with companies like Homeboy Industries, which is employing former gang members and reinforcing that they stay out of gangs."

Eventually, Taylor would come to decry much of TRU Colors' news coverage.

Early on, TRU Colors was tied to locations that didn't work out, including on Old Dairy Road and the old bus depot on Castle Street that is now the Midcastle housing development, right on the corner where the shooting that inspired TRU Colors happened.

There were other setbacks, including several TRU Colors employees being arrested for selling drugs and a non-fatal 2019 shooting at a house on Red Cross Street that Taylor owned.



TRU Colors Brewing was formerly in this 56,000-square-foot facility at 715 Greenfield St. in Wilmington. JAMEY CROSS/STARNEWS FILE

But Taylor pushed through these and other challenges, purchasing the 56,000-square-foot former Century Mills textile factory on Greenfield Street for just under \$1 million in 2019 and announcing a partnership with Molson Coors Beverage Company out of Chicago to distribute TRU Light in 2021.

A deadly shooting on Kidder Street in April 2021 occurred less than a block from TRU Colors but was never tied to the brewery. A shooting in July 2021, however, would have major implications for TRU Colors.

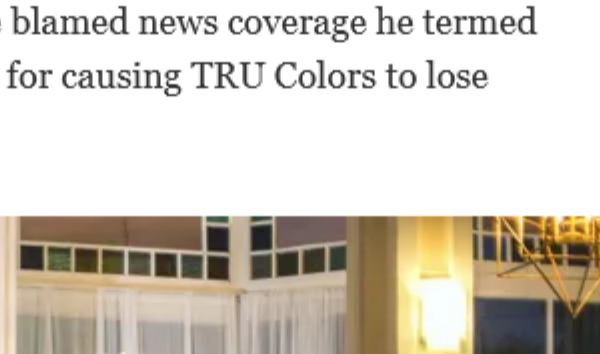
That's when employee and active gang member Koredreese "Corey" Tyson and 21-year-old Bri-yanna Williams were shot and killed at the home of Taylor's son, George Taylor III, who was TRU Colors' chief operating officer. A couple of days after his funeral, Tyson's grave was set on fire.

Dyrell Green, Raquel Adams and Omonte Bell were all charged with murder in the shootings. Their cases are currently pending.

Williams' mother, Adrian Dixon, blamed TRU Colors and Taylor for her daughter's death.

"I feel that his program, what he said was supposed to help, actually ended up hurting their people," Dixon told the StarNews in 2021.

Taylor defended the brewery and its business model at the time, saying "at least once a week we stop bullets from flying, sometimes every night in really difficult weeks," he said. "We've saved many, many lives. ... We're not changing anything. ... It works."



TRU Colors brewery founder George Taylor. PHOTO BY CHANDLER HATCH, PROVIDED BY TRU COLORS

Those statements show the influence on Taylor of another successful program, Cure Violence Global, which trains "carefully selected community partners and local credible messengers to detect and interrupt conflict, promote safer and healthier behaviors among high-risk individuals, and build healthy social norms," according to its website.

What kind of training, if any, TRU Colors employees were given in stopping violence, however, is unclear.

Tapping out

TRU Colors finally started brewing beer for sale in the fall of 2021, with TRU Light hitting the market in November, just before Thanksgiving. By the time the brewery closed, TRU Light was being sold at nearly 1,400 bars, restaurants and retail locations across North Carolina, with plans to expand into other markets.

Already beset with financial problems, as Taylor told the audience at the Wilmington Power Breakfast in late 2022, he blamed news coverage he termed "very aggressive" and "bordering on slander" for causing TRU Colors to lose investors.

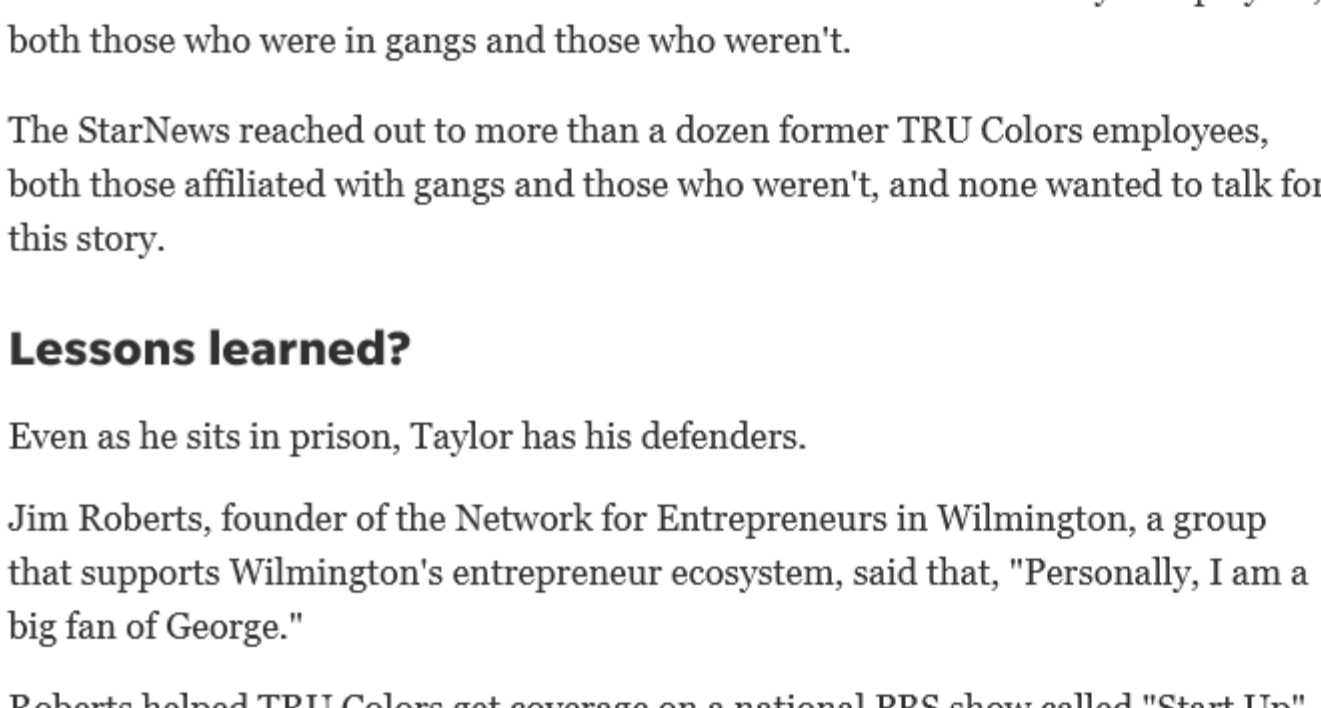
The New Yorker article about TRU Colors published on Aug. 29, 2022, questioning Taylor's methods, motivations, and culpability in the death of Tyson and Williams proved to be the final straw. By mid-September, TRU Colors was closed.

"First one (investor) dropped out, then another. Then they all did," Taylor told the Power Breakfast crowd in 2022. "In the end, that's what caused us to close. We ran out of money."

Taylor said he and his family "lost a tremendous amount of money," in addition to that of his investors. Taylor then went largely off the public radar until his sentencing for tax evasion in November of 2024.

The former TRU Colors building is still listed with the N.C. Secretary of State as being owned by SPARK715 LLC, a company that lists Taylor as its registered agent. It's now the home of FedUp Foods, which bills itself as the "leading fermented beverage manufacturer in North America" on its website.

A recent drive by the site revealed lots of activity, with cars filling up the parking lot and street spaces on both sides of the building.



The former Tru Colors building on Greenfield Street in Wilmington is now FedUp Foods. JOHN STATON/STARNEWS

In that sense, a positive of the whole TRU Colors saga is that a formerly deteriorating building was turned into a thriving business, just not the one originally envisioned.

What's less clear is how their time at TRU Colors affected the brewery's employees, both those who were in gangs and those who weren't.

The StarNews reached out to more than a dozen former TRU Colors employees, both those affiliated with gangs and those who weren't, and none wanted to talk for this story.

Lessons learned?

Even as he sits in prison, Taylor has his defenders.

Jim Roberts, founder of the Network for Entrepreneurs in Wilmington, a group that supports Wilmington's entrepreneur ecosystem, said that, "Personally, I am a big fan of George."

Roberts helped TRU Colors get coverage on a national PBS show called "Start Up" in 2021, and said that despite everything, TRU Colors was beneficial for those who worked there.

"The gang members were employed and had huge opportunities to learn new skills. (Taylor) put them through sales skills and life skills training that will last a lifetime. Some received sales training at the UnTappd software company and they were very good at sales," Roberts said. "Some of them received media (and) communications skills training."

Others, however, say that TRU Colors' time in Wilmington was a net negative, and not only because of the two lives lost.

Abdul Hafeedh bin Abdullah runs his Quality Life Blueprint program out of Sokoto House on Dawson Street. A nationally recognized thought leader in the field of violence prevention, an anti-violence study he co-authored was adopted as the official policy of Buncombe County's Justice Services division in 2023.

Sokoto House: With Port City United's future uncertain, another local group continues to combat violence

Abdullah said TRU Colors "did harm to a generation of young men and middle-aged men coming home from prison, wanting to come home and do something positive for themselves and their families," adding that the gang members who worked there "got mistreated" and "were not properly trained."

Abdullah said he doesn't know what Taylor's "motivations were," and that he doesn't hold him solely responsible for the TRU Colors fallout.

"It was a good idea, but things were added to it and it became a terrible idea," Abdullah said. "He didn't know what he was getting into. But it was bigger than him."

From businesses like Molson Coors to banks like PNC that gave the brewery loans to government agencies that supported and/or tolerated TRU Colors to the employees themselves, "Others saw it and watched it happen," he said. "At some point people knew what it was, and they continued (to support it). If pressure would've been applied to (Taylor), that would've stopped it. But it wasn't."

Worst of all, Abdullah said, the failure of TRU Colors damaged the trust of the very community it purported to serve when it comes to other programs that are trying to provide economic opportunity and/or prevent violence.

"People decided to experiment," he said. "If they'd said it was a pilot program people would've known what it was, but they didn't say that. ... There's lessons to be learned about what works and what doesn't work" when it comes to anti-violence programs.

One could argue that lower-profile, close-to-the-ground efforts like Sokoto House — which follows a community health worker model based on a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention program that treated violence and racism as a public health crisis — have had more success than high-profile flameouts like TRU Colors and Port City United, a violence-prevention program funded by New Hanover County that also shut down.

Abdullah said that, in his estimation, street violence and shootings in Wilmington have been way down in the two and half years since TRU Colors closed, something Wilmington Police Department statistics back up.

