

The Viking Vibe

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New Jersey Asks Students to Join War on Gangs Criminal Justice Director Pledges Funds for Student-Initiated Programming

By Tammy Tibbetts

Judging by the outpouring of generosity and remarkable patriotism of many Americans, the nation clearly seems to stand united against foreign terrorists. But do Americans defy the gangsters, bullies and teasers who intimidate their fellow countrymen with the same enthusiasm and strength as they do the Taliban?

Gang activity and recruitment are becoming increasingly problematic in the United States. Here, over 850,000 gang members exist and they are starting to network themselves so their influence spreads beyond a single community, according to Kathryn Flicker, Director of the New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice and the East Coast Gang Investigator's Association.

Ms. Flicker also said that in New Jersey alone, 10,000 people are involved in gangs which account for 20 percent of statewide homicides, including various other illegal or violent acts, like drug dealing and theft.

In an effort to suppress gangs, New Jersey law enforcement officials launched a new campaign on November 16th during the Safe Schools and Community Conference for high school journalists at the Trenton War Memorial. Senior Kelly Clark, juniors Vera Loftis and Tammy Tibbetts and sophomores Lindsey Conover, Jonathan Ferrer, Gabrielle Kachman and Melyssa Malby represented South Brunswick, along with their journalism teacher and *Vibe* advisor, Mr. An-

drew Loh.

Law enforcement and justice officers, as well as former gang members, spoke to nearly 900 young journal-

ists about gang life, its consequences and prevention efforts, hoping that the students will spread the word in their school newspapers. Secretary of State, Rev. "Buster" Soaries, Jr. delivered a dynamic speech in which he said, "we are going to wage war against gangs" because "terrorism happens every day in our schools."



Journalism students (left to right) Jonathan Ferrer, Lindsey Conover, Gabrielle Kachman, Vera Loftis, Melyssa Malby, Kelly Clark and Tammy Tibbetts, with Mr. Loh in front of the Frenton War Memorial.

Ms. Flicker also affirmed that "there are internal terrorists in our communities; those are gangs," while presenting a slide show with statistical and factual information.

The student journalists learned that gangs, though commonly associated with cities, are serious suburban problems, especially in lower class communities. Gangs

can be organized around race, ethnicity, moneymaking activities or territory, according to the New Jersey District of

sentence for armed robbery. The 31-year old said he was first deceived by the empty promises of gangs at the age of 15, when he suf-

fered from a drug problem and lack of self-respect. He later realized that "being part of a gang was an illusion," but not soon enough to prevent him from spending the prime of his life in prison, under constant supervision. Even while on stage speaking to the students, José could not escape the two police officers who shadowed him at every moment.

Recruiters like the ones who approached José fortunately do not pose a significant threat to South Brunswick since gangs rank near the bottom on the list of problems in the community, said Student Resource Officer, Richard Hutchinson. Gangs have been known to leave their markings on billboards, fences and houses in the township, but Officer Hutchinson said these instances are few and generally created by members visiting the area. However, he also mentioned that the stabbing incident over the summer at the Kendall Park Roller Skating Rink might have been gang-related.

"Gang recruiters talk good (sic), they sell you dreams, but once you get in, they tell you how to think, feel, hate, destroy," said José, a former gang banger who is now serving a 19-year jail

Though they may sometimes leave traces, gangs do not thrive in South Brunswick since the majority of residents belong to middle class society and are not attracted to the prestige gangs offer through theft. An absence of conspicuous gangs, however, does not mean violence or teenagers with low self-esteem do not exist at South Brunswick High School. Students who feel detached from their peers like José once did undoubtedly exist in every community nationwide—these individuals unfortunately are the most susceptible to gangs and the violence they engender.

"(We need to) find ways to ensure that every student feels a sense of belonging to a group and has a positive connection to at least one adult so that no student feels isolated, alienated or overlooked," said Mrs. Susan Coyle, a Student Assistance Counselor.

Another way to prevent gangs would be to apply for one of the mini-grants provided by the Secretary of State's Office and Division of Criminal Justice to students who want to take anti-gang initiatives. Ms. Flicker said \$1 million in grant funding will also be made available to county prosecutor offices where gangs are most prevalent. An additional \$1 million will be used to fund programs of police departments throughout the state.

Vera Loftis said she believes the Safe Schools and Community conference will help curb gang recruitment in the state and ultimately launch an attack on the internal terrorism afflicting America. "I think if the (student) journalists go back to their schools and make people more aware (of the gang issue), we'll get enough people together against it—something's bound to happen."