

Gangs threaten own kind of terror



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External terrorism has changed our lives, said Katherine Flicker, director of the state Division of Criminal Justice. But in our nation we suffer from internal terrorism: gangs, which she called terrorists without funding.

Flicker spoke to teen writers and journalists representing high schools throughout New Jersey who gathered at the War Memorial in Trenton on Nov. 16 for a press conference focusing on gang awareness and prevention.

With gang recruitment increasing throughout the country, law enforcement officials addressed the 1,000 high school journalists present with the goal of enlisting them to help spread the word about efforts to stem gang recruitment.

Promote safety

Law enforcement officials said that more than 10,000 people are involved in gang-related activity in New Jersey. The Safe Schools and Communities initiative is designed to help promote safety in our schools, on our streets and in our neighborhoods.

The event included a myriad of speakers, a guest musical artist, and a press conference where students could ask questions of the guest speakers present. The speakers included Deforest B. Soaries, secretary of state; state police representatives; and others.

Flicker's statistics revealed several things: There are more than 850 gangs in the United States; 20 percent of New Jersey homicides are gang-related; and 17 percent of New Jersey prisoners are gang members.

What's wrong with gangs? Just ask former gang mem-

ber "José," who shared his reflections with the audience.

"I lost my soul in a gang," he said. "Gang recruiters sell dreams, but they are all illusions. They manipulate."

According to José, who is 31 years old and has been incarcerated for six years with 13 more to go, his 15-year gang membership taught him to hate, to destroy, to never love or respect himself or others.

Gang recruiters look for a certain type of person, one with low self-esteem, one who feels unloved or wanted, and one who is uninvolved. José was a perfect candidate, and now he regrets it more than anything. He was a drug user, a follower, and maintains that his gang membership brought him nothing but more problems.

"I figured, let me be somebody ... and now I've wasted half of my young adult life in prison."

Alerting parents

As of this week, more than 270 billboards and 600 bus transit ads, alerting parents about gang prevention, will begin appearing in areas where law enforcement will be working to suppress gang activity.

Beginning next month, the Department of Law and Public Safety will broadcast a radio announcement in which "José" will be featured with an educational message to parents about gang prevention.

All of the speakers stressed that teens should get involved in activities and respect themselves. They hope that by preaching this they will spread the word that gang involvement is negative; it's not cool.

Soaries spoke about youth involvement and violence among teens. He was eloquent and comically captivating.

He began by saying, "Part of me resents that you know more than I did when I was your age." He was alluding to "street knowledge."

Soaries is deeply concerned with the state of New Jersey teens. "We should not only be concerned with terrorism, but with the epidemic of violence among teens."

But Soaries affirmed that we, the youth, are the ones who must solve the problem and end the violence.

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