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New Beginnings For Gang Members

By Lisa Finn

They've spent their lives bustin' guns, robbing banks, and beating their enemies bloody. They have been charged with an array of horrific crimes ranging from murder to career drug dealing. By their own accounts, they have grown up on poverty-stricken streets, been schooled in shattering lives, inflicting beatings and bringing despair upon the families of those they've brutally killed.

On the streets, each of the young men, members of some of the

deadliest gangs in the country, would admittedly have faced one another with hatred and violence. Bloods against Crips. Latin Kings against White Supremacists. But at the Suffolk County Correctional Facility in Riverhead, there is a program that has knocked down the walls, a program that is striving for new solutions to the gang problems that have rocked society in recent years. The program is called Council for Unity, and SCCF is being touted as a model, the first county facility to feature the program.

Council for Unity, founded by Bob DeSena in 1975, is a national non-profit organization with a history of successfully promoting inter-group relations and reducing violence in schools and communities. The idea is that by implementing school-based and after-school programs in leadership development, mentoring, career, college guidance and gang prevention, the Council fulfills a mission of empowering individuals and groups with the skills necessary to promote unity, safety and achievement.

Riverhead has been proactive in tackling gang issues, implementing Council for Unity in schools, the police department, the community, and most recently, in the correctional facility, where the program is in its first year. Last week, officials from Nassau County who are considering instituting the program in their own municipalities visited the facility to view a weekly meeting of the Council for Unity. And, based on the outpouring of emotion and heartfelt testimonials they witnessed, it is evident that, in the words of Sheriff Vincent F. DeMarco, "The program is working."



Before entering the jail, a visitor might harbor the belief that inside, one will find dark, dreary cells and an air of abject hopelessness. But last Thursday, as this reporter was buzzed through the gates and into the facility's chapel where Council for Unity meetings are held, the room was filled with artwork and poetry created by CFU members. And, as they entered the chapel in identical green uniforms, the prisoners greeted one another not with hostility or rage, but with handshakes and hugs, calling one another "Brother."

Brian Joseph, 17, is considered the "baby" of the group. He proudly displays a piece of artwork he created. "It took jail time to help me find God," he said. Gregory Roosa, who spent the entire night before the meeting drawing a depiction meant to represent the group's mantra, "Slaying the Dragon," created a piece of artwork so noteworthy that it may be used in the future with CFU materials.

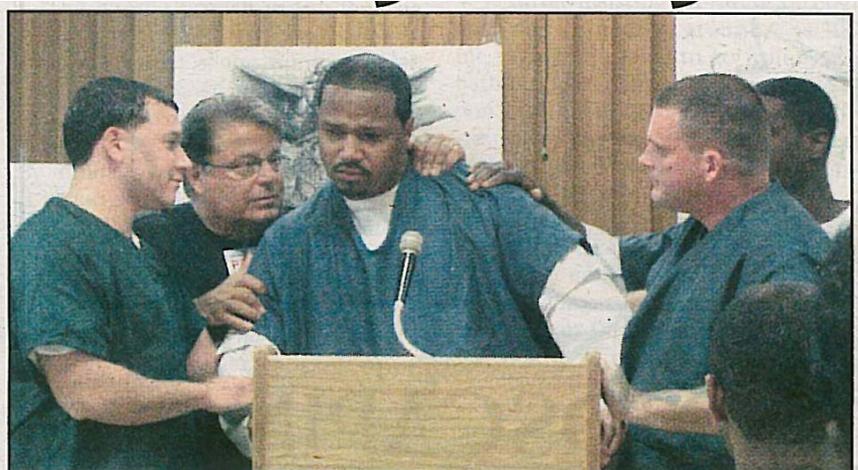
Despite the goodwill in the room, the prisoners make it clear that they've come from disparate places and lived on dangerous streets. LeQuarn "Lucky" Wade began the meeting by describing his life as a gang member. "A few years ago you could have caught me in your neighborhood selling drugs, or causing mischief. I watched businesses disappear, men and women lose their children, and I was a part of that because I sold them the drugs."

Then came DeSena, and an introduction to CFU. "I can't see myself doing that anymore," he said. "I believed that it was money, cars or women that would make me a man. What made me a man is what I'm doing today, what I'm fighting for." Sometimes, Wade can't believe the transformation himself. "You actually had to see me before, and then, see me here now. This is me, for real." At first, Wade admitted he had doubts about the program. "I didn't think it would work. No way could I see Bloods, Crips and Latin Kings all sitting in one room and talking, and then becoming something positive. But here we are, and it's so amazing."

Together, he said, the new family the gang members have forged "stands for something great. What we have done here is inspirational and touches my soul." Wade, who has been incarcerated for 14 months, said despite the jail time, "This is the most free I've ever been."

Roosa read a poem about his life in the streets. Today, he said, "Anger and hatred is no longer the food that feeds me." Another inmate known as "Mr. T" was picked up in the recent bust on the Shinnecock Reservation. As he stood up to speak, he began to cry, and his CFU "brothers" surrounded him, offering support and words of encouragement. "Nobody gave me a chance," he said, adding that if programs such as CFU had been in place when he was growing up, things may have been different. "Kids need an opportunity."

Run by corrections officer Alex Bryant and Sergeant Noreen Fisher, CFU classes focus on serious discussions about racism, watching films that deal with gangs, writing in journals, and about learning the concepts upon which CFU is built. Fisher said when the prisoners first came to CFU, they thought it was a GED class, and, unhappy to be there, slouched in, pants hanging low, and slumped in their seats. But when given a choice all returned to the program.



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Members from some of the most menacing and deadly gangs in the United States today, including the Bloods, Crips and Latin Kings, have found a new "family" through the Council for Unity program.

Jason Diadema, 22, had a mother who was a "crackhead and a prostitute. I'd see her on the streets with a pipe, hustling – selling her body for crack." Growing up, he said, "I thought I was all alone. I never had a mother and a father." Disenfranchised, he ran away from a group home and sought family ties with his gang, The Bloods, for over nine years. At one point, he went to live with grandparents on Long Island, where Diadema said the abuse continued. "I felt as though I had no place on this earth." When he first attended a CFU meeting, he had doubts. "I thought, 'I'm not going to sit with Crips and MS13.'" Today, however, Diadema considers rival gang members family and said Fisher "is a mom to me, the mother I never had." Diadema has two children. In the past, he didn't want them to know him, didn't want them to look at him "the way I looked at my mother." After CFU, said Diadema, "Now, I can't wait to go home."

All CFU members credit DeSena, as well as Butch Langhorne, assistant to DeMarco, and DeMarco, who were instrumental in bringing the program to Riverhead. They've bonded with Bryant, who's also the jail barber, and Fisher. And because DeMarco is on board, said Bryant, the program flourishes. If the mindset at the top does not change, old attitudes prevail, where "the perception is that inmates are garbage, and are treated as if they deserve nothing." Bryant acknowledges the high recidivism rate. According to United States Bureau of Justice statistics, 67.5 percent of prisoners released in 1994 were rearrested within three years, an increase over the 62.5 percent found for those released in 1983. But, he said, "If you can change one," that's a positive step.

And to work toward reducing recidivism rates, the goal is to implement CFU programs not only in jails, where the population is transient, but in prisons and in the community, so those who are released have a support network. Slaying the dragon, said Fisher, "seems to be working well. They are very optimistic, not as hopeless." Fisher adds that not all gang members are "mean-spirited." Gangs, she said, offer a "sense of family, of belonging. At first, they take care of you, and then payday comes and it means killing someone or burning down a house." Gang members, she said, wonder how getting "fancy sneakers ends up with them in jail. They wonder, "Where did it all go wrong?"

But, despite apprehension when she began running the program, today, Fisher is confident that she has "absolutely nothing to fear. Our group is a new family, where there is trust, love, encouragement and support." Fisher is adamant about working to effect change in the jail: "If you're really a correctional facility, you have to start thinking of ways to correct." Fighting in the jail has "calmed down," due to CFU.

DeSena, a champion for his program, greets all the inmates with hugs and support. "Gang violence," he said, "is stopping here." DeMarco agreed: "This is a bright light in a jail. The program is working, proving that some good can come out of the jail, perhaps for the first time in history."