The gang's all here
By JOSH MAX
Tuesday, June 27th, 2006

Leibowitz for NEWS

You might expect a man who arranges sitdowns between the toughest of tough street gangs to look like a combination of "The Godfather's" Luca Brasi and Conan the Barbarian. But Bob DeSena, founder and president of the Council for Unity, resembles more a glad-handing mayor with an easy manner and a man-of-the-people demeanor.

Tonight, the 64-year-old Muttontown, L.I., resident is helming his organization's 31st annual induction dinner in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where prospects who have made it through the required year-long probation become official Council for Unity members. More than 1,000 teens and kids, some as young as 6, are bopping to the hip-hop sounds blaring from huge speakers. Plenty of food at the room-long buffet tables awaits them after they work up their appetites.

There's much to celebrate: Since its founding in 1975, the council has grown to 48 chapters in more than 40 schools with more than 5,000 students enrolled. The nonprofit's network comprises 60 schools and community centers in New York City and Long Island as well as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America in Texas and California.

DeSena, who was born and bred in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, says, "I don't believe there is [such a bad thing as] a 'bad kid.' "Most of society regards kids in gangs as innately evil, sinister and unreachable and they want to just incarcerate them. But in my 30 years of doing this, when I go to a school with gang involvement and we present the Council for Unity, they come over every time. Every time. It tells me these kids are reachable, and if you give them an option that has meaning to them, they'll take it."

Coming from a good home doesn't have anything to do with whether or not a kid joins a gang, either, DeSena says. "A guy in my program did 15 years in prison, now he's out two years. He had two parents, came from an upscale home — and he still got caught up in the life."

DeSena, a former gang member himself who got out of that life early, started his professional career teaching English literature at John Dewey High School in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. "My background was in mythology," he says. "That helped me tremendously, because once you know that cultures are defined by their mythologies, you know how a culture works."

In the early 1970s, the high school was racked by violence between blacks and Italians, DeSena says. "It got very bad and something had to be done to stop it," he says. "I was recruited to try and help. I got six gang leaders to commit to an entire year of halting the violence to see if we could come up with an alternative.

"These were enemies and racists, but they ended up embracing unity. They saw that when they got together, there was nobody left to fight and no one to make fun of, either." In the wake of that triumph, DeSena founded the Council for Unity in 1975.

DeSena's smile is quick and his demeanor friendly, but his success in defusing gangs through three decades doesn't mean he doesn't consider his own safety on the job. "I've gone into mediation with some very hard-core characters," he says. "I do have a healthy fear. Without it, you're dead. But the basic emotion I feel when I deal with gangs is compassion and empathy. I'm looking to give them a choice, a second chance. So I'm not thinking of fear, I'm thinking of assistance."

In addition to its work in schools, the council also reaches out to communities and correctional facilities.

"I met Bob during a riot at Erasmus Hall High School [in Flatbush, Brooklyn], in 1993," says Rick Brown, 31. "I was a major gangbanger. But Bob was [gutsy], man. He didn't say, 'Don't,' 'Stop' or 'You shouldn't.' He said, 'If I can get you a legit job, will you quit this life?'

"One of my friends had been shot, and a few others were in jail, too, so I thought it was time to try another way."

Damon Rozier, 38, met DeSena at Dewey. "I was one of the bad kids [at the school]. I was selling crack and weed, and I had every one of my teachers intimidated — I had them marking me present when I was absent, that's how afraid they were of me. But Bob wasn't afraid; he wouldn't take any stuff off me. He helped me turn my life around, and today I consider him my father."

The Council for Unity also has a college chapter at the University of Vermont, and the program is constantly expanding. Scores of former Bloods, Crips and other gang members whom DeSena and his staff recruited into the program have gone on to personal and professional successes.

"Some are in the NYPD and FDNY, and we're really proud of them," DeSena says. "Others are, believe it or not, in the Secret Service, and others are successful businessmen."

DeSena has one son, Nikolas, 30. "He's on [the council's] board of directors. He grew up with people from every conceivable background. When he was a little kid, I used to bring him to the schools, and I always ran events at the house, so he got a great free education."

Tonight, DeSena shakes hand after hand and accepts hug after hug. He and colleagues gather for a photo; someone shouts out, "Y'all look like 'America's Most Wanted'!"

DeSena laughs, then points to a refrigerator-sized man in a suit. "See that one? He ran a drug posse. That guy next to him was the most-suspended in his school. The fellow by the door used to lead a gang.

"It's this huge family of thousands. What America is on paper, we've achieved in reality — Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Protestants, all of 'em, getting along. There are over 97 ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented in the program."

DeSena has statistics to back up his enthusiasm: 94% of council participants graduate from high school, 96% of those attend college, and 70% of participating principals reported a decrease in violent crime in their schools.

After 31 years, does he ever feel burnout looming? "Are you kiddin'?" he shouts. "I feel like a 20-year-old! It's a really exciting time. I see miracles every day. Real miracles."