

DAILY NEWS

Ganging up on violence

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At 14, Lefrak City native Sean (Dino) Johnson was running drugs across the country for a street gang. He spent the next 12 years in and out of jail.

With each release - and each return to his neighborhood - Johnson ascended the all-important street-credibility ladder.

"It was kind of like a rite of passage," the one-time college basketball hopeful said of his jail stints.

When he was sentenced in 1989 to 15 years at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility, the "street cred," fancy cars and jewelry didn't matter. Survival mattered.

Johnson used his lengthy prison sentence to escape his gang - one of the most common ways gang members break away from a life recruiters advertise as one of elegance and security.

"It's either prison, the mortuary or the wheelchair," Bob DeSena, the founder and head of Council for Unity, a Manhattan-based anti-gang group, said of escaping gangs. "Or get out of the country, where we [gangsters] can't get to you."

The gang landscape in Queens has changed since the 1970s. Many of today's gangs are less organized, and have no real goals other than committing random crimes and violence, Johnson said.

To combat what he called an upsurge in gang activity, Assemblyman Jose Peralta (D-Jackson Heights) has pushed to bring the Guardian Angels to his district and, in May, organized an informational session to help parents figure out whether their children are being recruited by gangs.

"We have to get to these kids before they join," he said.

Peralta said he plans to hold more workshops, and added that last year, Elmhurst Hospital Center executives held a forum to teach their staff how to identify gang-related injuries.

Assistant Queens District Attorney Michael Bravner told parents at Peralta's workshop in May that the rise of international "supergangs," such as MS-13, the Bloods and the Crips have helped spark gang activity across the borough.

Sometimes, kids "join for protection from other gangs already established," Bravner explained.

The supergangs infiltrated the city 15 years ago and, like the gangs they helped spawn, recruit kids as young as 8 by conjuring images that epitomize urban cool.

"Once these kids get in the gang, they realize it's about greed and betrayal, and it's not what they thought at all," DeSena said of gang newcomers. "By then, it's too late. They've given up their free will, basically."

In most cases, only senior members, or "OGs," (Original Gangsters) with enough notches under their belts from years of shootings, stabbings and robberies, can "retire" from gangs, DeSena said. He added that some street gangs will release members through beating rituals.

"But some gangs will never let you out. That's the real problem," DeSena said.

Very few gang members live to the retirement age, he said.

Just one year after Johnson's 2004 release from Sing Sing, the hulking ex-gang-banger landed a singing and dancing role in Hollywood's 2005 version of "The Producers," and got a job as director of school-based initiatives at Council for Unity.

At 43, Johnson is just beginning his life. mwhite@nydailynews.com