



BE OUR GUEST: ROBERT DESENA, founder, Council for Unity

Peer group offers solution to gangs' cycle of conflict

Recent statistics released by the Justice Department reveal that gang membership in America has grown to over 1 million. That figure is twice what it was 15 years ago. It is clear we are facing a serious problem, compounded by the fact that many communities and schools throughout the country are in denial that this threat even exists. That enables gangs to conduct their nefarious activities under the radar.

Why is gang recruitment increasing? Why haven't existing programs in schools and communities been able to stem or even reverse these trends?

Why can't law enforcement eradicate these phenomena? What alternatives exist for our young people that give them viable options to gangs?

These are questions that must be addressed and action taken now. If not, we will witness a growing increase in the number of youths being incarcerated. The vicious cycle of neglect in our inner cities will perpetuate the conditions that lead to gangs, and we will continue to lose a generation of kids who are choking daily on the bread of broken dreams.

Schools invest in programs such as conflict resolution and peer mediation to reduce violence. These strategies are based on the premise that kids caught up in conflict can freely choose to end it.

The truth is that once you are a member of a gang, you cannot make choices on your own. Your loyalty is not to a contract resulting from

mediation but to your crew, who controls you.

Couple this with the nagging poverty that still plagues many urban and rural neighborhoods, and the prospect of making money by joining a gang has constant appeal.

Additionally, kids feel impotent. Gangs offer them power.

Kids are tribal and need an identity with a group. Gangs provide that. Kids need structure and discipline. Gangs provide that, too. Kids seek

permanence. Gangs promise a lifetime of support.

While Queens is often regarded as the most diverse of all boroughs, it is not immune to this sinister sociology. Diversity in and of itself is but a menu of cultural separation.

It is in an atmosphere of cultural hostility that gangs take root. Kids from cultures that are struggling seek protection from those who exploit or persecute them. We don't need that here in the borough that is the model for the rest of the city.

So what can be done to compete with this sinister culture that is robbing America of its youth? One thing is more than clear:

You are not going to defeat this evil with programs and skill building.

Programs have shelf lives and most do not address the range of needs that gangs do. If they did, you wouldn't have government statistics indicating a runaway problem.

Until a medium can be found that addresses the deepest needs of kids and offers them a lifetime of support that is constructive, this is a battle we are going to lose.

Such a model exists. It is called Council for Unity. It is not a program but a culture that renders unnecessary a young person's need to join a gang.

Founded in 1975, the Council for Unity's original members were gang leaders caught up in racial violence in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. I was able to get them to see an alternative to an endless cycle of conflict where no side was capable of winning.

This group is committed to creating an alternative to gangs based on Family, Unity, Self-Esteem and Empowerment (FUSE). Gangs could not compete with this positive new peer group committed to the growth and development of kids.

This concept was and is supported by the New York City Department of Education and a curriculum was developed with credit given in English or social studies on the high school level for all program participants.

The model evolved and became more widespread. Today, Council for Unity has 45 chapters in elementary schools, junior highs and high schools in New York City alone. The numbers go up every year.

The model also exists on college campuses and correctional facilities. We have a chapter in Sing Sing and will be implementing our model in two high schools on Rikers Island.

To learn more about Council for Unity, log on to www.councilforunity.org. It may just reclaim your child and energize your community.

Robert DeSena, a former street gang member, who went on to become a New York City schoolteacher, is the founder and president of the Council for Unity.

Our initiative has 45 chapters in city schools.