

Our Schools

Riverhead School District

districtnews

Newsletter Vol. 23 / No. 3

WORKING TOGETHER FOR OUR SCHOOLS

January 2007

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES ENRICH THE COMMUNITY

Council for Unity expands its reach



Photo Caption: Suffolk Sheriff Vincent DeMarco signs an agreement to bring the Council for Unity program to the Suffolk County jail in Riverside. Behind him (L-R) Dino Johnson of Council for Unity, Riverhead Supervisor Phil Cardinale, Council for Unity founder Bob DeSena, Assemblyman Marc Alessi, Theresa Drozd, of RHS/BOCES, Sing Sing Superintendent Brian Fischer, Riverhead Police Chief David Hegermiller.

Three and a half years ago, Riverhead High School, with a population of about 1500 students and a diverse student body, was becoming even more diverse and at times more divided. An “incident” between two neighborhood groups and a growing concern about gangs moving east on Long Island, led the principal and the school violence prevention director, Theresa Drozd, to look for a program that could help kids get along and prevent them from turning to a gang culture.

About 25 high school students started meeting in a small, narrow room in the upper library of the high school as part of an after school club. The club’s lofty name, The Council for Unity, gave testimony to its purpose.

Robert DeSena, the founder and a man who radiates goodwill and fills the rooms he enters with enthusiasm and big hugs, infected those 25 kids, who as they put on free t-shirts began to talk together and find a new purpose for their lives. Through studying and discussing the organization’s tenets and curriculum, they formed a bond that transcended their differences. They

replaced the jail cultures that they mimicked with the ability to speak to others and in front of large groups and even to their own families about the skills they had learned to get along. Then they took their message to other schools (Brentwood and Central Islip), and finally into the community. It spread to the Riverhead Middle School (grades 7 and 8), the Pulaski Street School (grades 5 and 6), to the parents in the Riverhead community, and now to the Suffolk County Correctional Facility in Riverside.

The program will start the same way the high school program started with 25 people, and hopefully grow the same way that group did from 25 to about 300.

During a recent signing ceremony to adopt the Council for Unity program at the Suffolk County Correctional Facility in Riverside, Mr. DeSena underlined that for a program to be effective, it must provide those involved with a new culture of hope, and that hope must lead to a voice and a task in society.

“When Council for Unity members graduate

from jail, the community must step up and allow them to work,” he warns. “Inmates need to see that there is another way and that they can be successful members of society, or else they will return to their previous way of life out of necessity.”

Liz Stokes, a member of the Community Partnership, warned, “Young people going into jail come out gang members. They become associated with gangs in jail.”

Sheriff Vincent DeMarco didn’t respond directly, but introduced two detectives, whose job includes reading the colors and tattoos of incoming men and women and they noted that the facility counts at least 400 inmates as gang members.

“I don’t know about all the gang stuff,” noted Eric Ross, an RHS Council for Unity member who recently spoke to the audience at a Riverhead Antibias Task Force meeting. “I just know how it makes me feel. It helps reach across boundaries like what we wear and what kind of music we listen to and learn how to get know another person for who they are. I like that.”