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In a continuing effort to apprise society of gang violence and aggression amongst youth, the East End Gang Awareness Committee is holding its annual gang awareness seminar.

"This is our third year, and the last two years were very successful and well attended," said Nancy Lynott, LMSW, director of the Southampton Town Youth Bureau, and one of the major planners of the event.

The Youth Bureau is one of 16 planning committee participants in the conference, which include a variety of organizations, ranging from church groups, police departments, immigration advocacy groups, school districts and other youth associations.

"The East End Gang Awareness Committee feels very strongly that we have an opportunity to prevent a very serious youth gang problem on the East End through education and strategy," said Lynott.

As this is the third year for the gang awareness seminar, Lynott said that in order to encourage repeat attendees there are more comprehensive workshops being offered that encompass three separate areas of focus: gang education, aggression and violence in general, and specific combative strategies.

According to Lynott, Gang Education 101 is a workshop that demystifies the basics of gang ritual and membership. Indicators such as hand signals, clothing, colors and gestures all represent a subculture of gang activity that is essential information for anyone who wants to invoke anti-gang strategies in their dealings with youth.

Additionally, "we need to educate the public about the causes of such forms of aggression before we can develop strategies to combat it," said Lynott. Workshops about bullying and aggression include topics with specific and current themes, such as social aggression in girls, cyber-bullying, girl gangs and adolescents who commit hate crimes.

As a way to stave off the potential overflow of youth violence on the East End, the seminar is offering workshops on strategies that include positive behavioral interventions, youth ministry work, mentoring and community networking.

Robert J. DeSena, founder of the gang prevention organization Council for Unity, is involved in combating the growing gang problem in Riverhead and is presenting a workshop entitled "Girl Gangs: Through the Eyes of Former Female Gang Members," in which former female gang members share their prior life experience and their current opportunities through gang alternatives.

"The effort to combat gang activity in Riverhead is unprecedented. Everyone is coming together to join the Council for Unity in an effort that will really be a paradigm model for other towns and cities to bring about change," said DeSena.

According to Riverhead Town Police Chief David Hegermiller, CFU was enlisted to help in Riverhead when the Riverhead School District partnered with the police to search for anti-gang curriculum to present to students.

"In 2001, Theresa Drozd, the anti-violence coordinator for Riverhead schools, and I went up to the Bronx and witnessed the CFU program. We were very impressed and wanted to introduce it into our schools," said Hegermiller.

CFU was founded in 1975 and, according to its mission statement, "brought together six gang leaders from contending racial and ethnic groups to make peace." From this evolved the model that the Council of Unity uses today in order "to empower young people, individuals and groups with the skills necessary to promote safety, unity and achievement in schools and communities."

Serving youth in grades K-12, CFU invites them to join its chapters, where they spend at least an academic year developing and carrying out plans to promote school and community racial and ethnic harmony.

CFU's original model, involving a credit-bearing year-long course and a high school curriculum, has been adapted so that the organization now also serves elementary and middle school students, and youth in after-school programs and special settings such as group foster care homes. In 2000, Boys and Girls Club of America decided to use CFU as a gang intervention strategy, and today chapters operate under Boys and Girls Clubs auspices in six states outside of New York.

"Riverhead came up to see what we were doing with the gang violence problem in Columbus High School in the Bronx, and they were amazed at what they saw," said DeSena. "There were members from every gang, such as the Crips, the Bloods, the Latin Kings, the Albanian Boys, Inc., the Bones, the Tres Puntos, and they all left their gangs. They were all failing and truant, and went on to succeed."

DeSena said that when they left the gangs, 98% passed their classes and graduated from high school, and many went on to college. "It was a miracle," said DeSena. DeSena added that these are bright individuals who have great potential and thrive when given positive direction. When asked about what it takes to leave a gang, DeSena said that it could be as simple as not speaking to them anymore, or as complicated as going through a ritual called "getting jumped," where a gang member must sustain a group beating as a "de-initiation."

According to DeSena, leaders and community activists in Riverhead are anxious to ameliorate the tension in Riverhead and the growing gang activity before it reaches unmanageable proportions. Two areas in particular in which there are seeds of historical conflict that could erupt into exploding violence are Flanders and Doctor's Path in Riverhead.

"The police and the schools are concerned that one major incident could create a huge problem," said DeSena. "There are segregation and racial conflicts that need to be addressed now, before something happens."

Hegermiller said that the East End Gang Awareness Committee was spearheaded as a result of Lynott initially reaching out to various social service, law enforcement and government agencies.

"Nancy Lynott called our first meeting years ago at the Riverhead Library, and it just grew from there," said Hegermiller. "This is our third year, and every year before we had over 300 people in attendance."

The keynote speaker at this year's gang awareness seminar is Sean "Dino" Johnson, a former gang member and current leader in CFU. Johnson's story is one of success that was derived from a long and difficult road mired with gang activity, drug trafficking and prison time.

"I joined a gang, or a crew, as they called it back then, when I was 14 years old, in South Jamaica, Queens," said Johnson. "We were involved in drug trafficking and I spent 15 years in maximum security prisons all over New York State."

Johnson's life changed direction when CFU came to the prison and counseled him. He proceeded to become a CFU counselor while still in prison, helping youth both within and outside of the prison for 11 years.

Since his release from prison in September 2004, Johnson has been counseling youth and speaking at functions about his journey from the streets to becoming a community leader. In addition to his work with CFU, Johnson is a member of the Screen Actors' Guild and can be seen acting, singing and dancing in Mel Brook's cinema rendition of "The Producers."

"I got involved in a theater program in prison as part of my rehabilitation," said Johnson. "I am a huge proponent of the arts as a vehicle for expression. So many young people do not know how to express themselves and get involved in gang activity as an outlet. Arts in particular give people a sense of meaning."