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There is life after gangs - Former Crips and Bloods talk to **Council for Unity**
By Tim Gannon

RIVERHEAD--Kyle Harmon said he joined the street gang the Crips after watching his best friend get gunned down in a drive-by shooting on a Bronx street in 1999.

He said he assumed the shooters were members of the Crips' rivals, the Bloods, because the street the shooting took place on was a "Crip street," even though neither he nor his friend were involved in gangs at the time. Now 20, he works as a site coordinator for the **Council for Unity**, a group that seeks to mediate tensions between rival groups and bring people out of the gang life. Working with Mr. Harmon now is Tyree Tuck, also 20. Mr. Tuck is a former member of the Bloods.

They both attended Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx, which was considered one of the most violent, gang-infested schools in the city at the time. At one time, a student was thrown out of a second-story window of the school, Mr. Harmon said. Both men say they've now reformed, with the help of **Council for Unity**. Mr. Harmon and Mr. Tuck -- along with a third man, Sean "Dino" Johnson, and **Council for Unity** founder Bob DeSena -- spoke to members of the Riverhead **Council for Unity** last Wednesday at the town senior center in Aquebogue. The speech was presented by the town youth committee.

The Riverhead School District has had a **Council for Unity** program for three years now. It started as a club but is now a course. Riverhead High School was the first school on Long Island to get the program. According to Theresa Drozd, a BOCES violence prevention coordinator who brought the program to Riverhead, it has been expanded to Pulaski Street School, and will soon be implemented at the Middle School. They are now trying to create a community/parent **Council for Unity** program in Riverhead.

The **Council for Unity** was started in 1975 by Mr. DeSena, who was an English teacher at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn, where he helped bring together members of six rival groups to make peace at a time when racial tensions were swelling. It is now a nonprofit organization that seeks to quell violence nationwide using similar tactics and Mr. DeSena has high praise for Riverhead's program.

"What you're doing in Riverhead is going to become a model program on Long Island," he said. Riverhead was first to bring the Council of Unity program to Long Island, is first to incorporate a Council of Unity curriculum into its police training, and is first to expand the program to its elementary schools, he said. "Everything here is a first," he said.

Quadrae Mims, a Riverhead High School senior who was one of the first to join the Council of Unity three years ago and serves as its president now, said it was a game of dodgeball that helped get the council started here. "It was a game between blacks on one side and Hispanics on the other and it got serious," he said. "I got pegged in the head myself."

Mr. Mims said he was initially angry but realized better, and was able to get the two sides to mediate the dispute by bringing them to **Council for Unity** meetings. At the time, he had only just been asked by Ms. Drozd to join the council himself, and they were still learning the basics of the program.

Mr. DeSena said most of the reasons kids join gangs turn out to be not what they expected. "Some people join gangs because they were promised safety," he said, adding that most gang members instead live their lives paranoid that they will be killed. Some people join a gang to get an identity, he said, but "gangs thrive on mediocrity" and frown upon anyone with intelligence. Low self-esteem is another reason people get involved in gangs, and something **Council for Unity** seeks to address, Mr. DeSena said. Mr. Harmon and Mr. Tuck echoed that.

"I didn't care if I woke up the next day," Mr. Harmon said. "I felt that if I died, that would make my mother's life that

much easier." He said his mother raised him alone. "My father wasn't there for me. I couldn't read and I didn't care about school," Mr. Tuck said.

Mr. Johnson said his parents were both corporate executives, and he took to the street at 14 selling drugs. "I was a menace to society," he said. "I preyed on the community, taking dreams and hurting lives."

Mr. Johnson was sentenced to 15 years in jail when he was 25, and got out only 18 months ago, at age 40.

All three men said they initially laughed at the idea that the **Council for Unity** would change anything.

"They were going to put 40 gang kids in an auditorium together and try to change the school. I thought that was funny," Mr. Harmon said.

Mr. Harmon said his school required him to stay in the **Council for Unity** program, which is where his life began to turn around. Mr. Tuck said Mr. DeSena was the first person to see any potential in him, and that made him want to quit the gang and go back to school.

He said he's now in college, his reading levels have improved dramatically and he's also working for **Council for Unity**.

Mr. Johnson said he first met Mr. Tuck and Mr. Harmon in jail, when the two youths were both gangsters. When he saw them again two years later, he said, they were working for the council and had turned their lives around, which inspired him to do likewise.

Mr. Johnson said he became interested in acting and the arts while in prison at New York's Sing Sing, and said it was Mr. DeSena who wrote a letter on his behalf to get him paroled.

Now, Mr. Johnson said, he's a member of the Screen Actors Guild, had a part in the recent film "The Producers," and is back in school and working for **Council for Unity**. "How many people do you see get out of jail and go right back?" Mr. Johnson said. "But I kept remembering the transition these two men made."

Thaddeus Hill, a member of the town youth committee, said they've tried to come up with activities for youngsters to keep them out of trouble. He said some people don't want to believe gangs are a local problem.

"When District Attorney Thomas Spota said gangs were coming to Riverhead three years ago, some people in the business community let it go in one ear and out the other," said Mr. Hill.

Last November, the district attorney's office announced the arrest of 28 people with gang affiliations in the Riverhead area as a result of an initiative targeting gangs in Riverhead.

Ms. Drozd said the Riverhead **Council for Unity** is already planning another presentation aimed at promoting understanding and forgiveness.

On Feb. 2, a program called Rachel's Challenge will be presented at the high school auditorium at 7 p.m. It is presented by Dana Scott, whose sister, Rachel Scott, was the first person killed in the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. Rachel Scott wrote an essay a month before her death challenging people to "start a chain reaction" with kindness and compassion and to eliminate prejudice and choose positive influences.

Rachel's Challenge has been presented at schools all over the world, Ms. Drozd said.