



Council for Unity Idea Catches On

By Tim Gannon

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Last Thursday night, a group of Bronx residents attended a meeting of the Council's parent and community chapter with the goal of starting a similar program in their schools. A Council for Unity program also is close to beginning at the Suffolk County Correctional Facility, according to Butch Langhorn, an assistant to Sheriff Vincent DeMarco.

And CBS news is interested in doing a program on Riverhead's Council for Unity, which will be shown across the country, according to Bob DeSena, a former teacher who founded the Council in Brooklyn in 1975 to bring together rival gang members.

Council for Unity, which teaches conflict resolution, self-respect and ways for students to find positive outlets, has been active in Riverhead High School for about four years. Last year, it expanded to Pulaski Street Elementary School and Riverhead Middle School. The parent and community chapter was formed this year in an effort to bring people of differing backgrounds together.

"We're not going to allow adults to put the full responsibility for change on their kids," Mr. DeSena said last Thursday.

While the program was initiated in the schools, the parent and community chapter is aimed at adults. It meets the third Thursday of each month at Riverhead Free Library.

The group aims to bring together people of diverse groups who normally only stay within their own group. It is planning social events and get-togethers where people will just get to know each other, according to Theresa Drozd, an advisor on the school program.

"When I first came out here I was told you had a segregation problem that goes back 100 years," said Mr. DeSena. "You've got to solve it. We want to plan events where we can understand each other and have a year-long program where we celebrate each other's cultures. Then, the Walls of Jericho will come down."

He said that when people of different cultures begin getting together, "the segregation issue is

going to drop like a dead fly. You just need the will to do it."

Mr. DeSena launched Council for Unity in 1975 in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn, where he was a teacher at John Dewey High School, to ease racial tensions by bringing together members of six rival groups. Council for Unity is now a nonprofit organization with chapters in schools nationwide.

And according to Mr. DeSena, Riverhead's program is the one that other communities and schools consistently seek to emulate. "You've got kids and parents and community coming together," he said last Thursday. "This is not happening anywhere in the country. Everything you do is a step that somebody else is going to follow."

Carolyn Green, one of three Bronx residents who attended last Thursday's meeting and also visited the high school Friday morning, said the program was "awesome."

"We have to find something for children to do," said Terri Ham, another of the Bronx group. "This is what I wanted to do in the Bronx."

"If you want to terrorize the politicians, bring whites and blacks and Latinos together," Mr. DeSena said. "They'll be saying, 'Oh, no! We can't divide and conquer.'? If everyone's united, it's very difficult to say no to them."

Mr. DeSena said adults often are more difficult to change than children when it comes to bringing people from difficult backgrounds together.

Riverhead School Superintendent Paul Doyle agreed. "The biggest problem I have is with adults that advocate separatism," he said.

"The original members of Council for Unity were separatists," Mr. DeSena said, referring to the competing gangs that formed the first Council for Unity in 1975.

Also present last Thursday and Friday were Kyle Harmon and Sean "Dino" Johnson, two ex-convicts and gang members who now work for Council for Unity. They spoke to students Friday and explained how the program turned their lives around. Mr. Johnson, who took up theater while in Sing Sing prison, has recently had roles in some movies, including "The Producers."