

## Indifference shows on the streets

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As police swept Albany of 30 alleged gangstas last Friday, a tour of a different sort was also under way.

Former gangstas -- Latin Kings, Crips and Bloods from New York City -- were taking a drive through Arbor Hill, West Hill and the South End. They were here to promote the Council for Unity, a national anti-gang program with more than 60 chapters.

Law enforcement painted a black-and-white picture of the arrestees -- Sheriff James Campbell called the men, whose average age is 21, "bad, bad, bad people -- violent people whose value of life is nil."

The former gang members took a deeper view. After all, they used to be the problem.

As they drove the streets, the four men grew silent in the face of boarded-up buildings and faded store signs. What they saw was a city that doesn't care if its minority kids live on raggedy, segregated blocks while the downtown business district thrives. They saw middle schoolers who turn to crime in neighborhoods that lack libraries and community centers.

"You're just breeding criminals," said Sean 'Dino' Johnson, a former Sing Sing inmate who is now a council director and landed a 2005 role in "The Producers" movie. "We talk about how we want the youth to change. But we're not changing."

Former Crip Kyle Harmon, 21, looked at a wire-encased bridge outside Arbor Hill Elementary school. Tyree Tuck, 21, a former Blood, pointed at the graffiti tags. "This is all ganged up here," he said. Behind them were weeds, trash and a terrace frequented by drug users.

In 2002, a 10-year-old boy stabbed a fifth-grade girl nearby. Harmon looked at the catwalk, which kids cross to get to school. "Looks like going into a penitentiary, don't it?" he said. "It already gives (kids) a picture: You ain't goin' anywhere."

Law enforcement has played an out-front role in Albany of late. Violence at Albany High leads to news interviews with Chief James Tuffey, metal detectors in the high school and felony charges for some students.

But police and schools can't reach the root causes of social problems, Council founder Bob DeSena said earlier that morning. "All they can do is react."

The Council cuts violence by recruiting gangsters, parents and the larger community for school-based programs in leadership development, mentoring, career guidance and gang prevention.

"You cannot survive in a community where some people are thriving and other people aren't," DeSena said. "You invite crime and racial conflict. You can't win."

spend at least one academic year creating and implementing their own plans to promote school and community racial and ethnic harmony.

As the group headed to the South End, a young woman challenged Christian Ruiz from her Morton Avenue porch. "You look like that gangsta on HBO," she said with a laugh.

"I am," the former Latin Kings chief replied. But not anymore.

"You'd be surprised how many men want to redeem themselves in life," Johnson said.

Together, they talked about a vision for Albany: Of music studios and rehabbed buildings and kids getting diplomas instead of street creds in the "Jungle Junkies."

They drove down Third Avenue in the cold sun. The community police station was empty. The former Weed & Seed recovery program was shuttered. Dozens of houses were uninhabitable, at least legally.

Johnson and Turk idled in their SUV, staring at the buildings. At 33 Third Ave. Boarded up. Number 35, boarded up. Number 37? Boarded up, falling down and marked off by Department of General Services sawhorses. And more, up the block.

Blight like this wouldn't even happen in New York City, they figured. It wouldn't be so ignored. Somebody would say something. The SUV grew quiet.

"This says it all," Johnson said.