



Unity in Albany?

By: David King

Gang-prevention group wants the city to put politics aside and bring the community together to stop the cycle of violence in schools Sean "Dino" Johnson, an ex-felon and onetime resident of Sing Sing Prison, rapped his knuckles three times against a wooden podium in the auditorium of Albany's Harriet Gibbons High School last Thursday night (Nov. 16). Standing in front of an audience of school-board members, parents and local gang-prevention experts, Johnson explained that the "knock, knock, knock" was the sound of change at his door. It was, he said, the sound of an opportunity for change that he passed up as a young man, a mistake, he explained, that led him down a road of drugs and violence and, finally, to prison. He insisted that the same opportunity was now rapping on the doors of concerned Albany residents who want to reduce violence in their schools, who are tired of metal detectors and lockdowns.



Welcome to the Neighborhood: The Council for Unity present their vision. PHOTO: Chris Shields

The opportunity Johnson spoke of is the Council for Unity, a gang-prevention program that was started in 1975 by Bob DeSena, a teacher at John Dewey High School in New York City. DeSena and three of his staff members, including Johnson and Mark Wallace, who

also was incarcerated at Sing Sing, came to Albany last week to explain their program in hopes of gaining community and political support. On Thursday night it was clear that the community interest was there, as crowd members huddled in the auditorium, listening to DeSena and shouting out questions, looking for hope that change might come.

The Council for Unity tries to steer students away from gangs by getting them involved in community projects, and having kids from different races, lifestyles and achievement levels meet with one another on a weekly basis and talk about the realities of their communities. DeSena tells of calming race wars by having the heads of gangs participate in the program and come to understand one another. Classes and programs are taught by staff members selected by the school district for their ability to connect with students, often due to their past involvement in gangs or crime. In some districts the Council has outreach programs in prisons, and there is a national Council for Unity alumni program. The Council program is tailored to each school district, and the Albany program is not yet written in stone.

Albany District Attorney David Soares has championed the group, citing its successes downstate, and has secured at least \$25,000 in funding for the program. "It is the only initiative that I have come across that understands the importance of tying community with school and family," he said. "It is the only thing that deals with them substantively. Not only that, but it is the only initiative I have found that focuses on empowering young people and talks about changing the culture of violence. Everything else has a nice, neat package and bow that makes adults feel good but is not really doing anything for the kids."

Initially, the idea to involve the Council for Unity in the Albany School District's curriculum seemed to hit a sour note for Police Chief James Tuffey and Albany Mayor Jerry Jennings. In a *Times Union* article, Tuffey said he wondered if the program would lead to removing officers already in the schools.

However, last week DeSena met with Jennings and, according to DeSena, things went well, and he now feels he has the mayor's support.

"We don't disagree on many things," said Jennings of DeSena. "It's important we have programs for kids."

Soares said the time for putting politics over policy are over.

“The toxicity of the politics [in Albany],” Soares said, “has in fact destroyed neighborhoods, families and our schools. It is about time we put the interests of our families, our kids and schools ahead of our own political interests.”

The manic DeSena, who is also known as “Bobby Lips,” kept the crowd captivated Thursday as he explained how his program has bridged the gap between Blood and Crip, black and white, and how, by enlisting people whose lives have been touched by street life, prison and violence to conduct his program, he is able to get through to kids hardened by the streets. Johnson and Wallace told the crowd how the Council for Unity reached out to them through its prison programs, and how they realized they wanted to atone for their past sins through work with the Council.

Yusuf Burgess of the Department of Environmental Conservation, who is involved in gang prevention in Albany, said he had toured a school in Long Island where the Council for Unity was operating and was nothing but impressed. “The kids were ordered and disciplined,” he reported, “but they were happy to be there.”

Throughout the night at Harriet Gibbons, the sentiment echoed from crowd members that no matter how much they have tried to do, no matter how much effort they have put into helping kids in the worst-off areas in Albany, nothing has ever congealed into a larger effort.

One skeptical man told Soares, “I’m just grabbing the kids that I can, nine or 10 at a time, and taking them with me.” But DeSena told the crowd that the time for splintered efforts and rejected ideas has to come to an end.

“The people who don’t want to represent, the people who don’t want to apply resources,” he said, “if you all come together, they can’t play the race card anymore, they can’t play the culture card anymore. And you say, ‘Excuse me, but your constituents are staring you in the face!’ ”

Along with all the hope and enthusiasm, however, DeSena offered a caution: “I saw some of the papers said we were claiming we would eradicate gangs. We aren’t claiming that. No one will ever completely get rid of them.”