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Group Helps Gang Members Leave Crime

By ULA ILNYTZKY

NEW YORK (AP) — DaJuan Hawkins spent four months in jail for assault and thought he was a "nothing" destined for a life of street crime.

Today, the 17-year-old high school senior is heading for college and writing poetry.

Bobby Marchesi hung out with a tough group of Italian boys who clashed violently with black kids at his Brooklyn high school. Now, he's a lawyer in private practice.

What transformed Hawkins and Marchesi into confident, productive and compassionate human beings, they say, is Council For Unity.

Founded as a small anti-gang group in 1975, the council now claims to reach 100,000 people of all cultures in New York, Milwaukee, San Francisco and Vermont — and as far away as Nigeria and the Republic of Moldova.

And its mission has expanded: The Council recently published a book of student writings. It works with families and in correctional facilities. It is developing a public safety curriculum in partnership with police in Riverhead, Long Island.

The group's story begins with its founder, Bob De Sena, a one-time gang member and former English teacher at the once-troubled John Dewey High School, the same Brooklyn school Marchesi attended.

De Sena said he turned his life around because someone gave him a second chance. He wants the Council For Unity to do the same for new generations of kids from broken homes and crime-ridden neighborhoods.

The group has a 33-year history of getting gang members together to talk, based on a message that when you bring everybody together, there's nobody left to fight.

At Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx, gang activity ceased altogether after Council classes were introduced into the curriculum, said principal Lisa Maffei Fuentes. She said her school was on the city's most dangerous list three years ago.

"They've come to respect their home site, their school," she said.

Former gangsters drive the program, taught as a course in elementary, junior and senior high schools and colleges, and offered at community centers and prisons. Kids take the lead in finding solutions to conflicts without violence. They learn communication, leadership and organizational skills.

"This is a group that saves lives everyday," said Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers. "Nine-six percent of the students who participate go on to attend college ... 100 percent of participants report that the Council has had a very positive impact on their lives."

The statistics are especially impressive given the group's small budget — \$1.7 million a year, with support from the teacher's union, the city and its board of directors.

De Sena calls the program "an adventure in citizenship" that empowers people to take pride in their heritage and celebrate their differences.

Sean "Dino" Johnson, who heads the council's school-based initiative, spent most of his life behind bars for drug trafficking and weapons possession. He counseled prison youth at Sing-Sing, but "had no expectations of ever going home."

That changed in 2004 when he met De Sena.

"Bob told me, 'We need people like you on the outside,'" said Johnson, 43. "No one ever told me that people like me were needed."

He was freed weeks later after De Sena put in a good word with the parole board. The council then hired Johnson as a counselor, where he aims to be a role model.

"When they see someone who's been to hell and back, it clicks: 'If he can do it, I can do it,'" Johnson said.

Before Hawkins joined the Council, he said his life was a daily ritual of "fighting and winning" on the street. Through the Council, he channeled his leadership qualities to counsel other youth.

Hawkins was among some 20 high school students who came to hang out at the Council's cramped space in lower Manhattan on a recent afternoon. Like Hawkins, most were former gang members who have done time. But on this day they looked happy and confident, and spoke enthusiastically about their futures.

"I really thought I was nothing," said Hawkins, who is thinking of a career in entertainment after college. "I thought I had no purpose ... but Council introduced me to different things."

He sums up his feelings in a poem, his voice catching with emotion: "Before you I was a mess. Before you I couldn't care less. ... Together forever I say this fluently, Together forever Council for Unity."

On the Net:

- Council For Unity: <http://www.councilforunity.org>



Jelani Blanchard, 17, jokes with other members of the Council for Unity at their offices in New York, Tuesday, March 4, 2008. Founded as a small anti-gang group in 1975, the council now claims to reach 100,000 people of all cultures in New York, Milwaukee, San Francisco and Vermont _ and as far away as Nigeria and the Republic of Moldova. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)



DaJuan Hawkins, 17, poses for a picture at the Council for Unity offices in New York, Tuesday, March 4, 2008. Before Council, Hawkins' life was a daily ritual of "fighting and winning" on the street. Through Council, he channeled his "natural leadership qualities" toward positive choices. Now, the affable teen counsels other youth. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)



Sean "Dino" Johnson, who heads the Council for Unity's school-based initiative, poses for a picture at the CFU offices in New York, Tuesday, March 4, 2008. Johnson, 43, spent nearly his whole life behind bars for drug trafficking and weapons possession, before turning his life around with the help of CFU. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)



Founder of the Council for Unity Bob DeSena, left, sees off some of organization's members at their offices in New York, Tuesday, March 4, 2008. Founded as a small anti-gang group in 1975, the council now claims to reach 100,000 people of all cultures in New York, Milwaukee, San Francisco and Vermont _ and as far away as Nigeria and the Republic of Moldova. The group has a 33-year history of getting gang members to put down their fists and talk, based on a message that when you bring everybody together, there's nobody left to

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