

NY1 News

Tuesday, March 22, 2005

Group Turns City Teens Away From Gangs

What does it take to turn teenagers away from drugs and violence and onto jobs, hope and unity? NY1 Education Reporter Jennifer Rainville filed this story about a group that has helped changed the course of hundreds of city teenagers' lives.

"Seeing drug dealing people as idols, you know what I'm saying," said Louis Brown. "I had a mother and father that was working all day and all of that, but when you coming up poor, you want, I guess. the finer things in life."

Brown says that joining a gang would have been an easy and enticing thing to do growing up as a kid in Brooklyn and that if it wasn't for a group called the Council for Unity, he likely would have taken the bait.

"They just made me see, along with my peers, what was negative and helped me to go positive," he said. "Right now, I just took the corrections officer test as opposed to being in Brownsville hating cops."

Brown is like dozens of New York City kids, mostly young men, on the verge of joining gangs or in the midst of gang life who were shown another path by Bob deSena. DeSena was an English teacher at John Dewey High School 30 years ago. He recognized how gangs were tearing apart the school and the community, and why.

"It promises you power. It promises you a weapon," said deSena. "It promises you status. It gives you adrenaline. It gives you a family. Even though it's a sinister family, it's a family. And it gives you sense of identity. When you're a young kid, those are extremely powerful, powerful needs."

So, he got together some gang leaders and had them talk about their experiences in private. That discussion has evolved into a group that creates a sense of safety and self-esteem to compete with gang culture.

DeSena says the key to the Council for Unity's success is so basic, yet so powerful: teaching students who come from places with few options that there are alternatives to gang life and that what they have in common amounts to much more than their differences.

"Council promised a family, but that family was based on a commitment to your growth and development," said deSena. "Council promised safety – bring everybody together, you've got nobody left to fight."

Now, members in high schools citywide and even in other countries use deSena's model of family, unity, self-esteem and empowerment. The Department of Education even gives students course credit for the class.

And now those who were helped are giving back to the next generation.

"I have been able to help kids who were in my same situation from elementary school all the way up to graduating seniors," said Kyle Harmon, a former gang member. "I've been able to save lives. And if it wasn't for Council, I wouldn't have had my life saved."

It's a life, like so many others, that now has a future.

- Jeanine Ramirez