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Contra Costa County Youth Summit 2007

Talking and Listening to Young People Must Be a Two-Way Street

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By Federal Glover

WHAT'S THE MATTER with kids today? No, that lament didn't come off this newspaper's discussion board. That was from my parents' friends as they tsked-tsked about the jeans we wore in high school, the way we styled our hair and the music we listened to back in the '70s.

People are asking that question again after a series of incidents in Antioch where young people resisted police officers. The alarming difference between the troubles today and the troubles of my youth is the degree of violence.

Where fights used to be settled by fists like a street-level arms war, the conflicts have escalated beyond knuckles and knives to easily obtained automatic guns. Where wounds used to be superficial cuts or a black eye, people now are being killed.



Supervisor Glover

Most recently, 16-year-old Louis Straiten of Brentwood was gunned down in an Antioch theater's parking lot for no apparent reason.

Since January, Antioch has had four shooting incidents involving youths, two of them fatal.

Antioch police recently broke up a burglary ring and of the 16 arrests they made, all but four were teenagers.

The Antioch City Council has toughened the city's curfew in response to this rash of crime, making it illegal for minors to be on the streets after 11 p.m. unless they are attending a church or school function.

But it is not just Antioch's problem. Fatal shootings involving youths have occurred fairly recently in Bay Point, Pittsburg and Brentwood. And violence in Richmond doesn't make the front page any more.

I have been attending meetings with East County youths that are addressing this problem. From what I'm hearing, there is a disconnect between some of them and the rest of the community. The teenagers don't feel that they have a voice in the actions targeting them, that they don't belong here.

I don't pretend to have all the answers. The answers need to come from the youths, their parents, and the rest of our community. If we expect teens to be accountable for their actions, then we at the very least should listen to them. In some cases, they are cries for help. In other cases, they just want to be heard -- and taken seriously. The solutions that worked in the past need to be updated. Maybe they don't even work anymore.

I prefer to move beyond finger-pointing.

Antioch Police Chief Jim Hyde has formed the Youth Intervention Network in which adults and youths hope to establish some long-range activities for the city's younger generation. Pittsburg has a teen center where many of the recreation options for that age group originated. Bay Point has an active teen group at its Ambrose Center. And the Contra Costa Interfaith Council has youth involved in its programs throughout the county.

Last year, Oakley hosted a youth summit at Freedom High School that drew hundreds of young people from all over the county. The event offered information on financial aid for college as well as various career paths. Participants talked directly to city and county officials, got advice from former gang members, heard some good music, climbed a rock wall and generally had a good time.

I established the youth summit format when I was a Pittsburg city councilman. The first one five years ago was just a citywide event. It was so successful that I brought the idea with me when I became county supervisor and widened the audience to include young people from the entire county.

This year, the Contra Costa Youth Summit will be held April 28 at Los Medanos College, hosted by the city of Pittsburg and my office. Besides the free lunch, rock wall climbing, music and krumping (a form of dancing), there will be workshops and forums about careers, gangs, what it takes to be a "man," and other challenges facing young people today.

The conversation that needs to take place -- in homes as well as in the community -- is starting to happen. The Youth Summit and the community meeting on gang prevention will continue that effort and perhaps take it to the next step. Let's keep talking -- and listening -- to each other. (*Federal Glover is the District 5 supervisor. Reach him at dist5@bos.cccounty.us.*)