CONTRA COSTA TIMI

Barnidge: There are formulaic reasons why youths take to gangs

By Tom Barnidge **Contra Costa Times columnist**

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AN ARRAY of experts on youth violence spoke Saturday at a "Gang Summit" at Deer Valley High School in Antioch. Educators, police, and community leaders shared their insights at a workshop organized by Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover.

The real authorities on gang culture were standing off to the side, there to lend moral support. They call themselves "The New Breed" -- former gang members who have reclaimed their lives under the mentoring of Vernon Williams, an ex-con who found his calling counseling troubled youths.

They can tell you more about gangs than you would ever want to know.

For instance, family influence is the foremost predictor of life headed toward crime. Of six former gangbangers who were asked why their lives went astray, all mentioned relatives who paved the way.

"A lot of my family members were in gangs," Ricky Quevedo said. "I got in through my brothers and cousins. You do the things they do and become just like them. You look up to them."

"Everybody in my family sold drugs," said Corey Hunter. "I saw the lifestyle, the cars, the clothes, the women. My dad was a drug dealer, and I wanted to be just like him."

Both Quevedo and Hunter suffered serious gunshot wounds in their final days running with gangs. Hunter remains in a wheelchair as the result of an attack about two months ago.

The allure of the lifestyle is twofold, they said. First is the sense

of belonging that comes from joining a group -even a group dedicated to doing wrong -- because the most vulnerable youngsters have no other support system.

"I didn't know my dad," Tim Rudder said, "and my mom was always in the hospital, so I would run the neighborhood, and older guys recruited me when I was young. If you ain't running with somebody, you're running by yourself. That's the worst thing you can do."

Second is the feeling of power that comes from ruling your turf.

"We'd always go looking for a fight," Jordan Sizelove said. "Anybody that wanted to test us or look at us wrong, we didn't care. We were just out to get 'em. We had guns and stuff."

Because even the magic of gunfights lose its appeal after a while, it is not unusual for a gang member eventually to want out. Leaving is easier said than done.

"If you leave, you're the weak one," Rudder said, "and you get shunned in your own hood. Nobody wants you around. You have to fend for yourself."



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Gabriel Makinano, who assists Williams, said he quit gang life six years ago only after acknowledging the incessant pain and anger the lifestyle brought him. "I started asking God why I have to go through this," he said.

Robert Hurtado said his second of two trips to prison set him straight. "I met God," he said, "and he delivered me from the hatred."

Hurtado was the embodiment of the professional gangbanger. His success in dealing drugs -- that's the fuel that keeps gangs in cash -- provided him money, Hummers and Cadillacs. "I sold drugs to everybody -- attorneys, judges, business owners. You'd be surprised who uses in Contra Costa."

These days, he drives a Ford Pinto. His life has found a new direction.

Williams said young lives can be salvaged the same way they are twisted. The New Breed is simply a different type of gang. Members enjoy a sense of belonging -- they have each other's backs -- but the power they acquire is the control over their own lives. Instead of a dope sack to peddle, they get a shot at redemption.

We could use more gangs like that.

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