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Multnomah County's Stop the Violence program aims to turn around gang members, troubled youths

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Calente Adams, 17, opens a science book in preparation to stay after class at Albinia Youth Opportunities School to make up time he missed. Adams is one of 29 juveniles on probation who attended a recent session of Stop the Violence, a Multnomah County program that aims to turn around gang members and troubled youth. Adams, of Northeast Portland, said he has never been in a gang, but he was arrested in April for attempting to break into a bar to steal cash, alcohol and cigarettes.

With an open face and easy smile, Calente Adams, 17, doesn't look like a troubled kid.

He's a good student at North Portland's **Albinia Youth Opportunity School**, steadily worked on an assignment one recent afternoon as his half-dozen classmates browsed Facebook and complained to the teacher.

"I'm sick of struggling," Adams said later, as he looked up from a science textbook while making up class time after school. "I'm here trying to do something."

But a scar in the shape of a cross, which he burned into his arm at age 14 with a lighter and a scrap of metal, hints at a darker past.

Though Adams said he's never been in a gang, he acknowledged that he carried guns and broke into houses at age 16. Five months ago, he landed in police custody after he and a friend tried to break into a bar to steal cash, alcohol and cigarettes.

Now he's one of 29 juveniles on probation who participated in a recent session of Stop the Violence, a Multnomah County program that aims to turn around gang members -- and those at risk of joining a gang -- with a stick-and-carrot combination of stark warnings and helpful outreach.

The county's **Department of Community Justice** organized the program and has held two meetings so far -- the one Adams attended Sept. 23, geared toward members of the Crips; and one a couple of weeks earlier for youths identified as Bloods. The department has held similar gatherings for adult gang members for years, but these were the first for juveniles, said Kate Desmond, community justice manager.

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The program is modeled after one started in 1996 and developed by David Kennedy, a professor of John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, that gathers community members, public safety officials and others affected by gangs to try to redirect gang members through heartfelt testimonials and hard-hitting presentations.

"The whole idea is that these kids have a lot to offer, and we want them to be community members," Desmond said. "But if they don't behave in a pro-social way and make bad decisions, they need to know the consequences."

The meetings were planned before the recent uptick in area gang violence -- more than 70 gang-related shootings have been reported in Portland this year compared with 68 in all of 2009 -- but Desmond thinks it can't help but improve the situation. "It has people thinking about choices they're making and how they can make better ones for themselves," she said.

Jan Bishop, manager of the department's Juvenile Services Division, said the message is clear: "Negative behavior is not good, and violence is going to get you to an early grave. It is a message that hits home, but it's a message that has to be given over and over."

Though Adams has never been part of a gang, his probation officer, Leslie Taylor, thought the program would help him.

"I want my kids to see the impact of gunshots," Taylor said. Adams, who lives in Northeast Portland with his mom and younger siblings, is considered at high risk not only because of his own offenses but because he has an older brother in prison for gang-related activities.

The most recent Stop the Violence meeting began with a grisly slideshow of Portland victims of gang attacks. Photos of bloody head wounds, a man's leg shredded by a bullet and an X-ray of a skull after blog.oregonlive.com/.../print.html?entr...

pieces were blown away by a gunshot filled a large screen.

Young people in the room cringed and wriggled in their seats as Shelley Campbell, a trauma nurse for **Legacy Emanuel Medical Center**, narrated and clicked from one photo to the next.

"I've seen way too many people your age end up in the morgue," she said. "And I'll tell you, it's for stupid reasons."

Campbell showed a photo of a bloodied and battered 12-year-old girl and told how the girl was beaten by gang members she passed on the way home from school after they thought she insulted them.

"She lost eyesight in one of her eyes and was in the hospital for five months," Campbell said. Several in the room whispered to one another and said "wow."

Campbell explained the effects of marijuana and alcohol. She showed them the tubes that would be placed in them if they were brought to the hospital with gunshot wounds. And she showed them an autopsy photo.

"The people who love you are going to want to come see you," she warned. "We have to ask them questions like, are you going to be an organ donor? What funeral home would they like us to send you to? I'm not sure that's the future you had in mind for yourselves."

Portland police Lt. Dave Hendrie and county Deputy District Attorney Mike Riedel warned of the legal consequences of gang-related crimes. County Circuit Judge Ken Walker shared his story as a child growing up in Los Angeles' Compton neighborhood in the 1960s.

"I am you. You just don't know it," Walker told them. "I have seen more people shot, stabbed and killed than any of you have."

Walker said he was never part of a gang but was constantly surrounded by violence and lost many friends to it.

"Letting them know that I kind of came from that background, I hope it resonates," he said after the meeting.

Michael Johnson, a minister from **Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church** and a former gang member who spent 10 years in prison, advised the kids to take advantage of the department's resources. Representatives of programs that offer addiction and mental health services also attended, for example.

"I had a plan to get out of a gang. I had a plan to make my name mean something," he said. "In this room, you have plenty of help. Use that help."

Sharon Maxwell-Hendricks told about her 18-year-old son who is in prison for gang-related shootings.

"By the grace of God, no one was killed, hurt or injured. But that was a miracle," Maxwell-Hendricks said. " It may not be that way for some of you. You do not have to go that direction."

Cecilia Affleje, Adams' mother, was moved by Maxwell-Hendricks.

"I think about that," Affleje said, holding back tears. "He could be the person walking down the street, be the innocent bystander."

Adams said he, too, was affected by the meeting.

"I think we all have potential, but for some reason, us kids just don't see it like that," he said. "People don't know what they're getting themselves into, and then it takes something really big like that, like getting shot, to realize it."

Adams insisted he has a plan for his life: to finish high school, go to college and land a career working with animals.

Taylor, his probation officer, confirms his progress.

"He wants to get his life back in order," Taylor said. "He is a lot more motivated than a lot of the kids I see."

More Stop the Violence meetings for juveniles are planned, though Multnomah County officials acknowledge the fight against gang violence won't be won quickly.

"I don't think it's going to change things overnight; it's planting the seed," said Bishop, of the Juvenile Services Division. "It's an ongoing process."

Adams, meanwhile, has volunteered to speak at a future Stop the Violence meeting.

"I could show them that, 'Hey, I can do it, and you can do it because what's the difference between me and you?" he said. "But I think I still have a ways to go to prove that."

-- Molly Hottle

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