

# Fighting Back

Community needs to work together against gang activity



By Pat Cole  
Arcade Life

**O**n March 29, the sheriff's department hosted a gang awareness symposium at the Howe Park community center. Presenters included representatives from the department's youth services and gang suppression units, Sacramento County district attorney's office and Sacramento city's code enforcement division.

It was an attention-getting, fact-packed presentation, followed by a question-and-answer session, aimed at parents of potential gang members—children as young as 12 to 14 years old. It was one of those “scared straight” presentations. We

were shown alarming statistics about gang activity designed to help parents understand the serious lifelong consequences of joining a gang. (Yes, we have gangs in our community.)

The first speaker from the youth services division, Sgt. Mark Scott, talked about the sheriff's gang awareness program, which is only a few months old. He gave parents ways to tell if their children are involved with a gang, how to recognize the warning signs, and straight talk about parenting. His main theme: Don't be a buddy; be a parent.

Anthony Ortiz, a deputy district attorney from the homicide unit, explained the heavy penalties for those convicted of crimes with gang-related aspects. One bad choice puts them at risk of a very long prison sentence.

After a disturbingly graphic video, Detective Brandon Luke talked about how members of the gang suppression unit evaluate whether a person is a gang member. I was so horrified by the photos and videos of the stark brutality of gang crime that I was ready to leave the presentation.

Gangs begin by marking their territory with graffiti. Experts from the gang suppression unit can tell by the content and design of the graffiti if a gang is claiming an area, if a rival gang is trying to take it over or if someone is merely “tagging” a vacant building, fence or wall. Tagging, while ugly and hard on property values, doesn't necessarily represent gang activity.

One way we can deter gang activity is for each of us to be vigilant and report graffiti or tagging. Code enforcement has crews to clean it up. Regional Transit takes care of its property. SMUD will clean up transformers. Products are available to clean your fences, walls or place of business. The creation of more neighborhood watch groups will discourage illegal activity. We also need to call in complaints and crimes so law enforcement can track what's going on.

Deputy Cary Trzcinski talked about the Sacramento Sheriff's Activities League, whose members guide and mentor youth. Prevention is more effective than punishment. A local

successful example is the Friday-night hoops program at Family Life Center at St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church in Oak Park, where police officers and mentors hang out with kids, play basketball and teach life lessons that let kids know they have choices and that they can succeed. We need to work together with all agencies involved: law enforcement, community-based nonprofit and faith-based organizations, and school administrators who can identify at-risk children and work on truancy, the gateway to juvenile delinquency.

Detective Michael Saigeon ended the symposium by asking if we are going to respond in a reactionary way when gang-related crimes affect us, or are we going to build a movement in Arden and Arcade to provide a long-term generational solution? I say let's step outside of our cocoons and work together.

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