

Gangs and our Youth

Waking up every morning for school used to be the same ol' drag...motivate myself to get out of bed by rockin' some beats on my cd player, splash some water on my face, brush my grill and bounce out of the house. I always looked forward to the adventurous journey through the hood, filled with shortcuts thru alleys; backyard brushes with neighborhood dogs, a stop at the neighborhood bodega, the sounds of adults arguing and the buses braking, filled the air. I remember becoming bolder as the grades passed, 3rd, 4th, then 5th, 6th, ...started cursing along with my favorite songs, creating a "bop", my signature stroll that emphasized my attitude. The world was mine and growing up was a snap, middle school was right around the corner and that meant different teachers, more freedom, my own locker and most of all.....more girls. Middle school also meant an extra six blocks were added to my journey, six blocks farther than I ever traveled before, big deal....right?

The next school year started with me arguing with my mom about my school clothes. She bought me the same ol' shirt and pant outfits I wore in 5th grade.....I needed to step my game up and dress the way middle schooler's were dressing. Oversized t's of all colors, baggy pants, Roc-a-Wear, Phat Farm, G-Unit, everyone was sporting the latest fashions. I lost the argument as usual and on the first day of school, tried to hook up my outfit the best I could. I didn't need much motivation to get up for the first day; anticipation of being in "middle school" was enough to keep me up half the night. My mom told me "be careful" and "smart", as she always did, and to get right to school and "act like I know". As I ran out the front door, I realized my best friend, whom I've always walked with to elementary school, was taking a bus to a private school and that left me solo for the first time. I put on my cd Walkman and popped in my cd and was off....

The first few blocks seemed like I was going back to elementary school except for the right turn on the "Ave.", as it was called, and six more blocks to the monstrous building that housed me and 850 other students. The "Ave.", was the main strip in our city and it contained the majority of the businesses, chicken shacks and more liquor stores than I could count. I walked in the mass of people who were rushing to get to their trains, buses and jobs. I saw the school in the horizon and also started seeing other kids flowing onto the "Ave." I wanted to stop by the closest bodega to school to load up on my "energizers".....gum, chips, and skittles. I noticed a large group of students were hanging by a store called Manny's and figured it was the spot. As I approached the store, I noticed the older kids were all wearing the clothes I TOLD my mom I should've bought...oversized jeans, size 7X t-shirts, fitted caps, everything!! I walked in and surveyed the store looking for the candy section. The store was filled with kids and was noisier than the store I was used to going in elementary school. I spent my lunch money on my sugar fix and headed out the door. As I walked back onto the "Ave.", a short pudgy kid who was wearing the same color t-shirts as the others he was with, bumped into me causing me to drop my bag of goods to the sidewalk, causing a roar of laughter from his friends. I instinctively bent over to retrieve my candy and figured it was just an accident and expected an "excuse me" from the boy. I straightened up and glanced in his direction, he said, "you got a problem?" and continued to stare at me. The rush of nervousness went straight down my spine and it was a feeling I wasn't used to. I continued walking towards school and heard him and his friends making fun of my clothes and laughing. I remember asking God to someday let me see that boy alone, without his friends, we'd see who would laugh then.

At school I was overwhelmed with the size of the school, the number of buses in front, everything!! I had no choice but to handle my biz and do what I gotta do. The first day went by like a flash...it seemed like it was over before it started! I thought...cool....this is gonna be a snap. I went home the same way I came to school and as I passed Manny's, I noticed the pudgy boy and his friends were still there. I crossed to the other side of the street, avoiding any possibility of a confrontation. I noticed a girl from my homeroom was also walking on the same side and we smiled

at each other nervously as we strode along side each other. She said "hi" to me and I returned the gesture feeling a sense of relief that I didn't have to say something first. She said her name was Tameka and I introduced myself awkwardly, "I'm Vonnie". She asked where I was going and I told her I live down the 'Ave." about 6 blocks away, coincidentally, she lived on the "Ave.", right where I turn to head home. We talked about our previous schools and how our first day went, I told her the problem wasn't school, it was the boys at the store next to school. She proceeded to laugh and said, 'them Bloods....them boy's is wack!!.....don't sweat them." I heard about Bloods and Crips and knew they were around my area but outside my school? They didn't look like Bloods? What does a Blood look like? I laughed along with Tameka and continued home.

The next day I traveled the same route and hoped I would see Tameka on the way down the "Ave.". As I turned into the sunshine beaming on the "Ave.", I squinted into the distance looking towards school. I didn't see Tameka and figured I'd catch up to her in homeroom. My next thought was my stop by the bodega and a run in with my pudgy friend. I was a block away when I saw the faint image of oversized pink t-shirts and then I saw my nemesis. I tried to act like I didn't notice him and strolled into the store looking to purchase my goods....first mission complete.....now out the door. I walked quickly out the door and one of the pink shirts spit in my direction, missing my pants by inches. I continued to walk when I felt the wetness of a liquid drench my pant leg. I turned and saw an empty soda can lying next to me and heard the laughs from the boys in pink. Furious, I looked at the group and let my anger shine, reaching down at the can, I asked who threw it. A tall, lanky boy stepped to the front and removed a pink bandana out of his back pocket shouting, "You got beef with NSB?" Hearing this, the rest of the students who were in the area started to surround us, looking to see what was going on. I nervously looked around trying to spot a familiar face to come to my allegiance, to no avail. The boys approached me and again asked if I had beef with NSB, to which I responded, "no". They got charged up by my meager response and fed off my vulnerability and nervousness and continued to create a scene. The feeling of helplessness and embarrassment was too overwhelming to put in words.

It didn't take long for the word to spread around school about me being 'punked" by NSB and any thought of a "reputation" like I had in elementary school, was being flushed down the toilet. I always thought of myself as popular, well liked and all those things kids look for, now I'm being treated just the opposite. After school I walked home and saw Tameka walking with 3 of her friends. I wasn't up to being ridiculed anymore so I figured I'd mind my business and walk home alone. Tameka shouted hi to me and I waved hello back at her. She ran across the street with her three friends and they surrounded me asking 10,000 questions about NSB. I tried to be as cool as I could and played it off as if it was nothing, just another walk in the park, no big deal. I thought I had them fooled when Tameka commented on how she heard I was 'shook" and didn't even look them in the face. My machismo deflated like a tire and I couldn't comment to defend myself. I tried to change the subject when Tameka's friend, Shantell, said NSB is scared oh her brothers Crip set TTP. She said everyone knows about TTP and they run things. Run things? What does she mean? Shantell proceeded to describe how her brother has mad jewelry and a fat car with chrome rims and a DVD player in the car. Everybody in school always talks about those rims and platinum jewelry and being gangsta, you mean to tell me your brother is one of them? We walked down the "Ave." and I was ready to turn towards home when I heard loud music and a car approached us. Shantell smiled and said, "that's my brother RJ!" the window rolled down and an arm with a huge gold watch came out. The next thing I saw was big chain and pendant hanging around his neck, the latest sean john outfit, just like the rappers wear. He called Shantell over and I saw him give her a wad of money and tell her a list of things to do. When he rolled away, I asked her what he gave her and she showed us all the money! She must have had \$500 in assorted bills!! It was the most money I ever saw and I asked her what she was gonna do with it. She laughed at me and said, "Go shopping stupid!" She was to give her mom \$250 and the rest was hers to do what she pleases. Wow!

Everything I'm looking for.....protection, power, money, belonging and respect.....Shantell's brother has.....now how do I get it?

The above was one of a million scenarios in the lives of kids across our countries that are looking for a sense of purpose and think that gangs are a solution. Vonnie is searching for many things, he's scared, he wants acceptance and just wants to fit in. Children as young as 8 years old are now mimicking gang signs, gang dances and gang slang. Families must provide the 3 major components in life we all need; protection, belonging and respect. Gangs provide a false sense of the same values. The rise in "latch key" children and unsupervised youth that are searching for voids to be filled in their lives are feeding grounds for gangs. The lure of fast money, material things, family security, peer pressure, fear, boredom, there are many reasons that gangs are attractive and our society has to start working together to combat this epidemic.

Youth gangs now plague urban, suburban and rural areas across New York and New Jersey. The suggestion of having just "wannabe's" is the wrong approach, a wannabe is a wannabe. Denial is still a very big factor in communities struggling with youth gangs and youth at risk of gang behavior. The availability of drugs and the lack of positive alternatives for youth are just a few factors in the growth of gangs. Schools play a major role in gang prevention through the implementation of "zero tolerance" on gang related identifiers such as hats, beads, bandanas, etc. The "strong" parts of our communities have to assist the "weak" parts of our communities with programming and social intervention. Opportunities and structured programs must be available for our youth, especially in the vital hours between 4pm to 9pm, when most youth are out of school and more criminal activity takes place. Combating gangs is not a law enforcement problem, it's a community problem.....with proper awareness programs, education, social intervention, job opportunities and continue law enforcement suppression, we can continue to save lives and create a stable environment for our children.

Peace.

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