

VIRGINIA



Sheriff

VOLUME 31, NO. 2
SUMMER 2008

SHERIFF JACK WEISENBURGER
CITY OF BRISTOL
2008-2009

VIRGINIA SHERIFFS' INSTITUTE PRESIDENT

Marketing The Truth About GANGS

INMATES TALKING TO MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

LIEUTENANT KATHLEEN CAREY, PIO

Students stirred in their seats and looked over their shoulders. They watched for inmates to enter the school auditorium. When Sheriff Gabe Morgan said, "What I've done is gone inside the jail and got three people," it grabbed their attention. Morgan continued with his introduction. "They're going to tell you the truth. They want to help others from falling into the same trap they fell into."

And with that, a movie began to play. Three 24-year old inmates spoke to students via video. The Newport News Sheriff's Office took a creative approach in addressing the consequences of gang activity. Rather than physically bringing inmates to

school, the Sheriff brought inmates to the big screen.

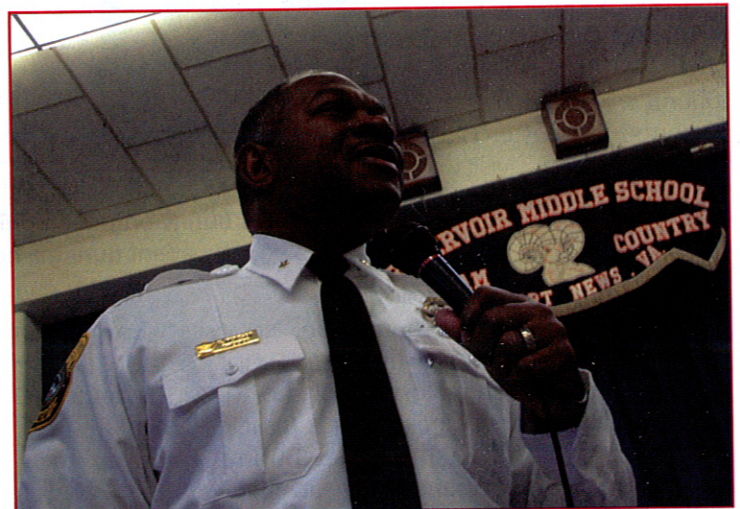
Over a two-day period, eighth graders at four area middle schools attended assemblies on gang prevention. Even some parents chose to attend. The program was a collaboration between the Commonwealth Attorney's Office, the Sheriff's Office, Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) and the Woodside High School theater troupe. Each was an assembly presenter.

Artesia Todd, Assistant Prosecutor with the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office, spearheaded the gang prevention programs. Todd is tired of putting young people behind bars. She and her office want to do something to steer kids in the right direction. It is a matter of being proactive not reactive. Todd explained that in the state of Virginia, you can be tried as an adult at the age of 14.

"How many of you in here are 14 years old?" Todd asked the students of Passage Middle School. Hands go up. "That's almost all of you. I am seeing



The making of a movie produced by the Newport News Sheriff's Office using inmates talking about their mistakes.



Newport News Sheriff Gabe Morgan takes the microphone at Reservoir Middle School.

too many of you in the courtroom. A lot of young people your age—eighth grade and younger. We are prosecuting them because of the crimes they are committing. And what we want to do is try and reach out to you before you make bad decisions,” she continued.

Naturally, schools are trying to get ahead of the game too. Principals at An Achievable Dream, Passage, Reservoir and Huntington Middle Schools were eager to have the gang prevention program at their school.

Teachers are desperate for answers on a subject outside their expertise. Classroom dynamics are evolving. New challenges are being created. More and more young people are committing more and more violent crime. Many of those crimes are linked to gang activity.

High school performers from Woodside opened the assemblies with a play about organized street gangs. For some in the audience, it was their first time seeing live theater. The gripping script captured the attention of the eighth graders. The play’s message penetrated the young audience because it was performed by young actors. Peers tend to pay more attention to peers.

That is why Sheriff Morgan used young inmates as part of his presentation. Who better to talk about the consequences of crime than those who are paying the price? “You hurting more than just yourself,” said James Miles. “You may not be hurting your so-called ‘friends.’ But you’re hurting your family. It’s a waste of your life.” Miles, an alleged gang leader, is charged with murder, intimidating witnesses and robbery among other things.

Dwayne Coles began getting involved in the criminal justice system at age nine. By age 11, he was caught burning down the judge’s house. He was

sentenced to more than two years for arson. He’s been in and out of jail ever since. “Like I say, most of my life I’ve been incarcerated. All my younger years—all my teenage years I’ve done give to DOC,” Coles said.

What he would do to trade places with the teenagers in the audience. What he would do to start over. He doesn’t want these kids to follow his path. “Look man, you know what ya’ll doing is meaningless. It ain’t gonna do nothing but you gonna end up in an orange jumpsuit or you gonna end up in a coffin.”

For the girls in the audience, there was Michelle Jones. She got pregnant at age 15 by a 25-year-old man who didn’t stick around. Jones actually started using drugs late in life by today’s standards. She was 20. “I got married to a guy that was smoking crack and trying to get him to stay home—I thought if I started doing it, it would be better for us. But that didn’t happen.”

What happened was a downward spiral into addiction and prostitution to pay for her habit. Jones said, “There are no friends in the crack game. There are no friends in the street. The only friends is your family.”

Sheriff Morgan wrapped up his presentation with Virginia law. How does the law define an organized street gang? What does the law say about graffiti? About bullying? Research shows that bullies are four times more likely to be convicted of a crime by the age of 24 than non-bullies. “But let me tell you this,”



Sheriff Gabe Morgan addresses hundreds of eighth-grade students at Passage Middle School.



Artesia Todd, Assistant Prosecutor with the Newport News Commonwealth’s Attorney’s Office, organized the gang prevention programs.

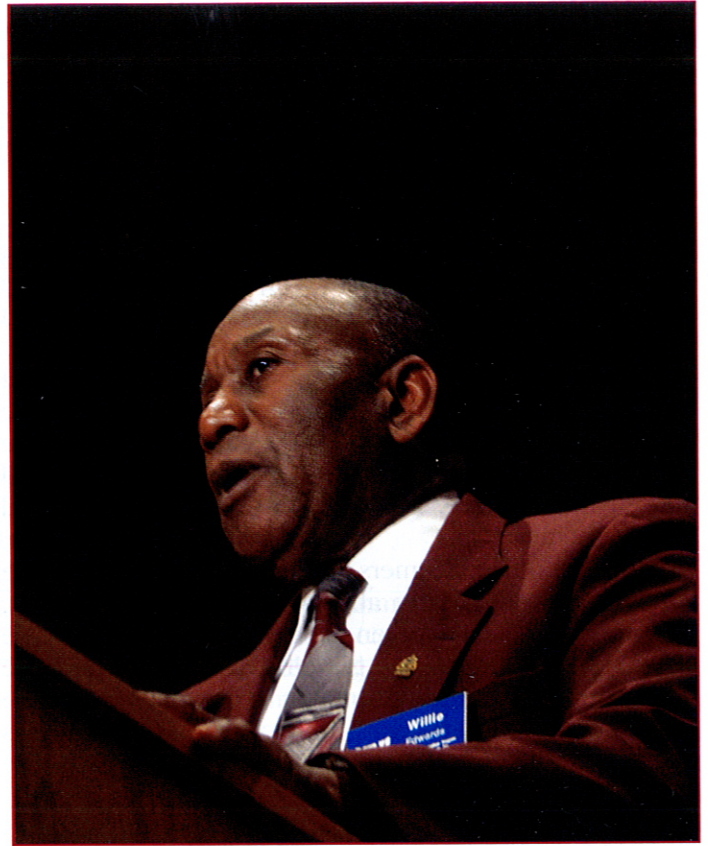
Morgan implored. "We're here—the Commonwealth Attorney's Office, the Sheriff's Office, Woodside High School, RSVP—we're all here because we love you and don't want to see another child die."

Talking about how gangs impact the community was RSVP and a mother whose son was killed by a gang. Julia Haynes lost her oldest boy in November 2007. Erique Shaw was 19 when he was cut down by a bullet just outside of his home. Haynes has been left to mourn the loss of one child while trying to raise another boy who looked up to Erique. "When you get into a gang, your choice out is death. My son died because he was trying to get out. It took him to see his little brother with the flag. When he saw his brother doing that, he was like, 'Okay wait. I can't get down.' He got killed because he wanted out."

Students heard from two grieving mothers. That's right. Two. Gang violence stole a child away from one mother. The children of another mother are slipping away because of her own poor choices.

Inmate Jones had the last word in the movie produced by the Sheriff's Office. "You're not thinking about the children that are looking to you on a daily basis wanting to know where their mother is," her voice cracked. Overcome with emotion, Jones began to sob, "And it's just not worth it. It's not worth it."

For more information, contact Lieutenant Kathleen Carey at 757-926-8747 or 757-813-6139.



Willie Edwards with RSVP, Retired & Senior Volunteer Program, talked about how gangs impact the general public.



Actors from Woodside High School depict gang violence in a gripping skit.



Theater students from Woodside High School perform a one-act play about street gangs.