

## **Gangs discussed at forum in Easton**

Speaker says knowledge is key to keeping youths from becoming members.

By Tyra Braden, Of The Morning Call. August 26, 2007

Gang expert Michael Leonard showed photos of the "Black Gangsta Disciples Alphabet" and a series of complicated hand signals. The intricately drawn letters, which have no resemblance to the ABCs taught in school, and the signs, he said, should be taken for what they are -- evidence that gang members are sophisticated and prey on youngsters to increase their numbers.

"We always thought gang members were dumb," Leonard said. "They're not."

Leonard was one of several speakers who participated in the Common Union Minority Forum at Greater Shiloh Baptist Church in Easton on Saturday. He, Easton Police Chief Larry Palmer, City Councilman Ken Brown, Bonita Crowe, an administrator at Northampton County Prison, former East Orange, N.J., police Sgt. DeLacey Davis, and attorney Sam Murray, who evaluates cases where children may be removed from a home, addressed dozens of people who attended a session about the judicial system.

Leonard lives in New York but is a member of Shiloh. He works as a criminal justice consultant. In addition to the alphabet and hand signals, he explained that "codes, colors, everything means something" in a gang. "This is why kids are in trouble. Gang bull crap. Let's call it what it is."

Nationwide, Leonard said, 24,000 gangs exist, and 760,000 people are members. Knowledge, Leonard said, is the key to helping keep children out of the ranks.

"A lot is going on in this society that we're not discussing," he said, adding that a child can join a gang via the Internet. "We're not really discussing as adults what's really going on."

After seeing Leonard's photos, Crowe said, "I wish I could say some of these symbols were unfamiliar, but they're not." She said she finds it "terrifying" to deal with some prison inmates.

Palmer said he wants to "turn the city around and make it what we want it to be. We are not going to arrest our way out of the problems." The chief said city leaders and residents must work together to help children.

"We're losing a generation of kids," Brown said. "We're losing a generation of kids because we're not spending enough time with them. We're not telling them that we love them." Brown said he lived in Philadelphia as a child and, at age 7, was recruited by a gang, given a gun and told to shoot a woman. Fortunately, he said, he dropped the gun.

His mother moved the family out of the city and into Easton, then went on to form a block watch.

Murray said he was familiar with Brown's brief gang relationship and knew Brown's mother uprooted the family to go to a better place. "It was a better place" years ago, Murray said. "I want a better Easton" now.

A woman in the audience, who didn't give her name, said her son got into trouble, but she was fortunate to have the Rev. Phillip Davis of Shiloh help her. She noted that Paris Hilton and other rich and famous people who get into trouble seem to get favorable treatment and lighter prison terms.

"There are two standards," Palmer said. "That's what message is being sent."

Leonard said people need to understand the judicial system before attacking it. Defendants who don't have people to support them aren't likely to fare as well, he said.

Brown agreed. "We have to learn to be on the field," he said. "We can't leave it up to the judicial system." He urged people to join committees "so we have a voice, so we can do all that we can do."

A man in the audience asked what is being done to prevent problems.

DeLacey Davis said nothing's being done. "They privatize prisons because it's big business." Gangs, he said, have a hierarchy and reward and punishment system. "They're better-organized than we are," he said.

Panelists agreed that getting children involved in organized activities could help to curb problems.

The daylong session was organized by the Easton Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Shiloh, Second Baptist Church of Bethlehem and El Puente/The Bridge.

In addition to the judicial session, the forum included panel discussions involving education, entrepreneurship and health.

Forum leaders said earlier they intend to analyze comments generated from the session and hold a follow-up forum later.

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