

# PIKE COUNTY COURIER

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UPDATED: MARCH 6, 2008

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# Workshop highlights bias and gang problems

By Bill Doolittle

PUBLISHED: MARCH 6, 2008

DINGMANS FERRY — A gay couple returned to their Shohola home last week to discover a stuffed monkey in an obscene pose hanging in their yard.

The story of this incident was used Saturday to illustrate the rapid increase in hate crimes in Pike County.

The occasion was a gathering of some 100 concerned citizens at the Pocono Environmental Education Center to hear warnings from experts about the rapid increase of bias incidents here.

Magistrates, politicians, law enforcement officials, teachers and students joined the group of attendees to learn about the extent of the problem and consider solutions.

The symposium was sponsored by Tri-State Unity, and led by Robert Veneziale, vice chairman of Unity, who gathered a diverse group of experts to talk about the bias problems, and the growth of gang activity in Pike County.

Veneziale noted that the law enforcement bias incident count was much lower than the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission's reports because the police figure of five incidents reflects only those the police accepted for possible prosecution, whereas the commission counts every instance that "the victim felt it was bias," Veneziale said.

The commission reports 27 recent bias related incidents in Pike County. Some 16 of the reported bias incidents occurred in the workplace. "We need to be aware. We need to fight bias," said Veneziale adding, "We need to teach tolerance."

Sometimes, he said, the police officers brush off a bias incidents among teenagers as, " 'it's just kids.' But silence sends a message that bias will be tolerated."

Two speakers, gang expert Michael Leonard and Pike County Sheriff Philip Bueki, warned that gang activity was increasing in the Poconos.

Leonard showed several pictures of graffiti, including one on the side of a tractor trailer found in Monroe County.

Sheriff Bueki said the gang problems in Pike County were "sky rocketing." Both men warned that Pike residents were still "in denial" about gangs here.

Socio- drama routine shows real-life problem

At times it seemed the Pike teenagers were really mean while they picked on a girl who confided in a gossipy friend that she was a lesbian. Instantly, the teenage pack mentality surfaced, and the girls took turns insulting and harassing their former friend.

Her father lapsed into denial and a clueless guidance counselor made matters worse.

It was all just acting, but the shocking impact on the adult audience was palpable.

It was meant to be.



Robert Veneziale speaks at bias symposium last Saturday. (Photo by Bill Doolittle)

The drama was staged by the Pike County Safe Haven, and the teenagers are members of RYOT ( Rallying Youth Organizers Together against Rape).

The purpose of the playlets was to dramatically demonstrate how hatred of gays might impact students, school counselors and parents.

The same actors staged a second scene in which all involved with the gay girl behaved with sensitivity and compassion. In other words, the teenagers demonstrated how not to act (with hatred and rejection), then how to act (with kindness, support and understanding).

By performing a "socio-drama," the young actors focused the audience's attention on sexual harassment and gay bashing in schools.

The actors were Bailey Harman, Morgan Keller, Ashley Prosser, Tiffany Rodriguez, Amanda Henry, James Gitto, Jesse Schaffer, Sam Briganti, Sarah Azzollini, Christina Caraballo, Lauren Ashworth, Brittany Racliffe, Amanda Prosser , Laura Rieder, Kaitlynn Horacek, Joe Arguelles, Dan Budd, Cindy Stine and Perry Gower.

— Bill Doolittle