

Guest speaker sees worth in mentoring program

By **Andrew Scott**
Pocono Record Writer
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Michael Leonard of Stroudsburg is no stranger to facing physical danger to work with at-risk children in tough neighborhoods.

Leonard, 51, recalled one day when he and a group of teenagers arrived at a street corner in his native Brooklyn, N.Y., to remove graffiti from a wall as part of a community improvement project. They were about to go to work when about 200 Blood street gang members suddenly surrounded them, daring them to touch any part of the graffiti the gang had put there to mark its turf.

Leonard called a friend who worked at a nearby prison and asked him to drive a prison van around to their location.

"That saved our lives that day," he said with a grateful smile.

While the Poconos is a far cry from Brooklyn, Leonard sees children with families who have moved here from New York City and other areas. He sees some of these children, too many in his opinion, heading down the wrong path to criminal activity.

"Whether you want to believe it or not, gangs are here in Monroe County, and they're looking to recruit our kids," he says. "We have a choice of being proactive in preventing gangs from taking over our community or being reactionary whenever a tragedy occurs."

A former New York City probation officer and Housing Authority program director who is now a criminal justice consultant and author of the book, "Youth, Gangs and God," Leonard speaks at community events focused on increasing safety and improving quality of life.

One of Leonard's goals is reaching out and networking with anyone in the Poconos who is trying or wants to give local children positive alternatives to crime and gangs. He himself has a history of providing such alternatives as a former Brooklyn Police Athletic League coordinator and borough community services manager.

"I would take kids on trips to the museum and other places," he says. "When I was with the PAL, I would challenge kids to basketball games and make bets. I'd tell them, 'If you win, you can do what you want, but if I win, you've gotta stay in school.' Most of them would look at me, thinking I had no skills, but then they'd be surprised once we got on the court."

"I'd offer little deals and incentives like, 'If you can name the last six presidents of the United States, I'll give you \$50,'" he said.

That's why Leonard was agreeable when Norman McCullough of East Stroudsburg, who recently started a mentoring program in East Stroudsburg, asked him to be one of the guest speakers to a group of teens taking part in the program. Leonard's topic was law enforcement careers.

"The kids were great," he said. "They seemed really into it, and they asked questions. That shows me there are kids out there who want to do the right thing and make a difference."

Leonard talked mainly about how beneficial law enforcement and criminal justice careers can be.

"I told the kids, when you get charged with a crime, you become a source of income for a chain of people," he said. "That includes the police officer who arrested you, the lawyer who's gonna prosecute your case if the charges don't get dropped, the lawyer who's gonna defend you, the judge, the guards at the prison you go to if you get convicted and finally your parole officer."

Leonard suggested one can do more good for the community and be a better role model in law enforcement than in crime.

"And you can make the money you want, have the things you want and not worry about anybody coming to take it away from you, because it's all legal," he said.

Leonard praises the mentoring program started by McCullough and others.

"It's an effort worthy of more attention and support from the community," he said. "It invests in our kids. And a community can only make itself stronger and more resistant to negative elements when it does that."

Leonard has a Web site, www.Gangsreal.com.



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Michael Leonard talks to youths during his program at Greater Shiloh Church in Easton.
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