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Thursday, MAR 06, 2008

**News Index**

- Home Page
- Arts & Entertainment
- Community
- What's Happening
- Obituaries
- Property Deeds
- Milestones
- Schools
- Sports
- Opinions
- Contact Us
- Submit Announcements
- Subscribe

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- Search Ads
- Submit Your Ad

**Channels**

Horoscope



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**Forum targets gang activity in Pike**

Veronica Deisler 06.MAR.08

Discrimination and gangs. What do they have in common?

They target young people, threaten the community and can lead to criminal activity, according to Robert Veneziale, vice chairman of the Tri-State Unity Coalition (TSUC).

On Saturday the TSUC co-sponsored a forum on "Discrimination and Gang Activity in Pike County" at the Pocono Environmental Education Center in Dingmans Ferry.

The fact that so many community leaders were present — state Representatives Michael Peifer and John Siptroth, District Attorney Ray Tonkin and Delaware Township Supervisor Ileana Hernandez, to name a few — is an indication of how seriously they view the two issues.

**A growing problem**

Dr. Veneziale reported that Pike County, with its rapidly growing and diversifying population, has experienced 44 bias-related incidents since 2000 – from racial to ethnic to sexual. Hate speech and graffiti were the most common types of discrimination, but some cases involved violence, vandalism and threats.

Gang activity is also on the rise. Pike County Sheriff Philip Bueki remarked on the amount of gang-related graffiti popping up in the area over the past four or five years.

"In the beginning, a lot of us knew nothing about gangs," he said.

"Graffiti is the newspaper of the streets," explained criminal justice consultant Michael Leonard Sr. "It tells you who's holding down that neighborhood."

He said gang members by definition are involved in criminal activities, such as drugs, prostitution and theft.

According to Mr. Leonard, the Poconos are a fertile area for gangs.

"There's more space and less law enforcement," he said. "Many parents work in the city and have to leave their kids at

**Highlights**

- Community**
  - Weiland to lead Pike County Chamber of Commerce
  - VIEWS FROM LOOKOUT: 3/6/08
  - OUT AND ABOUT IN PLEASANT MOUNT: 3/6/08
- Schools**
  - Students' efforts serve those who serve the nation
  - THE HHS INSIDER: Senior class trip itinerary, Part 2
  - WILDCAT WANDERINGS: Making memories
  - THE WALLENPAUPACK WEEKLY: Be entertained by the stars
- Sports**
  - Wrestlers to appear in Y benefit
- Opinions**
  - EDITORIAL: Those who helped us now need our help
  - LETTERS: 3/6/08



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home without supervision. Gangs also look for communities in denial or not organized to confront them.”

### **Education is key**

Mr. Leonard, Sheriff Bueki and Dr. Veneziaie all agreed that education is the best way to counter discrimination and gang activity.

“Admitting it’s here and doing something about it is how to fight it,” said Sheriff Bueki.

Dr. Veneziaie listed the “10 Ways to Fight Hate:” act, unite, support the victims, do your homework, create an alternative, speak up, lobby leaders, look long range, teach tolerance and dig deeper. Many of these steps, which can be found at the Tolerance.org Web site, apply also to battling gang activity.

Hate often begins in the home, said Dr. Veneziaie, and bias is learned in childhood. He emphasized that schools and communities need to unite to teach tolerance of others. If they don’t speak up, their silence can be interpreted as acceptance.

Letitia Lladoc, a multicultural studies instructor at Gratz College, in Melrose Park, discussed the power of diversity in people’s lives. She explained that culture can influence the way people act, so it’s important to understand people – not just as individuals – but also from a cultural perspective.

Sheriff Bueki spoke about his work in the schools with the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program, and how it’s made a difference. Learning that gang life involves drugs and criminal activity often surprises kids, he said. He then gets them to talk about the worthwhile groups they can join.

“There’s still time,” said Mr. Leonard. “If you show kids what they can achieve instead, you can turn people around.”

The forum ended with a panel discussion and a moving, interactive sociodrama about sexual harassment and gay bashing presented by the Rallying Youth Organizers Together (RYOT) Against Rape. RYOT is a program sponsored by Safe Haven Inc. of Pike County, to educate youth about diversity, awareness, education and prevention.

### **Getting help**

For anyone experiencing a hate crime or bias-related incident, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) is the place to turn. One member of the audience who had filed a complaint stood to say it was a long process but was worth it.

The PHRC protects people in 14 classes of discrimination, including race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, age, sex and disability. Its jurisdictions cover employment, public accommodations, housing and commercial property, intergroup tension and education.

Co-sponsors of the forum with TSUC were the Unity Coalition of the Poconos, the Monroe County Advisory Council for the PHRC, Safe Haven Inc. of Pike County, and the Pike County Democratic and Republican committees.

Other community leaders present were Susan Mathias from Congressman Christopher Carney's office, judges Deborah Fishcher and Stephen McBride, Eastern Pike Regional Police Chief Eric Stewart, Delaware Valley School District Police Chief Mark Moglia, East Stroudsburg North School Police Officer Al Klingele, as well as a representative from the Delaware Water Gap Recreation Area Park Rangers.

The PHRC will hold a public meeting on May 19 at 1 p.m. in Milford. For information about the meeting and Saturday's forum, tips for responding to discrimination and gang activity, and numerous online resources, call coalition at 686-5555 or go to [www.tristateunity.org](http://www.tristateunity.org).

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#### **more . . . Home Page**

06.MAR.08 Forum targets gang activity in Pike  
 06.MAR.08 Firefighters seek better communications  
 06.MAR.08 Western Wayne won't foot drivers' rising fuel bills  
 06.MAR.08 Birmelin to fill vacancy in Lake  
 06.MAR.08 Recalled beef was served in Western Wayne schools  
 06.MAR.08 Official to speak at WEDCO dinner  
 06.MAR.08 No 'Sunshine' on appointment  
 06.MAR.08 Palmyra won't limit turns at new shopping center  
 06.MAR.08 Wayne to purchase metal boxes to collect paper ballots  
 06.MAR.08 State Police reopen investigation into fatal accident  
 06.MAR.08 Palmyra approves regional comprehensive plan  
 06.MAR.08 AROUND WAYNE AND PIKE COUNTIES: 3/6/08  
 06.MAR.08 White Mills woman sentenced for fleeing police  
 06.MAR.08 Milford man wanted for two Pike armed robberies  
 06.MAR.08 Tallman, 18, seeks to become GOP delegate  
 06.MAR.08 Register by March 24 to vote in primary election  
 28.FEB.08 'Oklahoma!'  
 28.FEB.08 Sculpted Slide  
 28.FEB.08 Sewer authority needs start-up cash  
 28.FEB.08 Three Pike municipalities get grant money  
 28.FEB.08 Lake likely to pass Honesdale in population by 2010  
 28.FEB.08 Residents get government's take on gas drilling issues  
 28.FEB.08 Fire damages one residence in Barker Street Apartments  
 28.FEB.08 Conservancy hopes to preserve another 10,000 acres

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