

S.T.R.O.N.G. Youth, Inc.

STRUGGLING TO REUNITE OUR NEW GENERATION

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Sergio Argueta
Executive Director



May 30, 2007

Dear Honorable Congresswoman McCarthy and Members of Congress:

I begin by thanking you for taking the time out to address this very important issue. The issue of gangs is one that has been devastating many of households across America, and the suburbs of Long Island are no exception.

I come to you this morning representing the countless youth lost to the plague of gang violence throughout Long Island and the United States of America. I represent the millions of mothers and fathers that cry themselves to sleep at night because they have either lost their children to the senseless gang violence or the criminal justice system as a result of gang involvement. I am here representing the countless grandparents that have had to deal with the unnatural results of burying a grandchild due to the unprecedented accessibility to guns on the streets, while having limited accessibility to employment and alternatives to gang life. Most importantly I represent the millions of youth that are crying out, hoping to be saved from this epidemic.

I have been to hundreds of schools throughout the North East region, and no matter how hard the living conditions in that community might be, whenever a child is asked what they would like to be when they grow up, the answers are almost always synonymous. "I want to be a lawyer...a doctor...an athlete...a nurse...a fireman...a police officer." Some of these kids have the audacity to go as far and say, "I want to be President of the United States of America someday." The audacity of

these young people to think they can achieve whatever they desire is something that leaves adults wishing they still had the ability to dream.

Regardless of their race, their socio-economic background, their religious background, or any other socially structured categorical framework we can place human beings under, these answers are always the same. I have never heard a child say I want to be a killer, a drug dealer, a murderer, a gang member. If this is the case, why are we losing so many children to gang involvement?

It is true that popular culture is currently glamorizing this lifestyle at unprecedented levels, but it is also true that this is not new. Although people like to point the finger at the Hip-Hop industry as the root cause for the increase in youth/gang violence and the increase in gang membership, this is not the only genre of music or entertainment that commercializes the criminal lifestyle. American pop culture has always glamorized outlaws and that imagery as something cool. The modern day 50 Cent and Rap music is looked down upon by an older audience or those that don't listen to this genre of music with as much disdain as the parents of the 60's looked down upon Rock & Roll and Elvis Presley. The violence in our media is desensitizing to the young mind. Whether it be video games where you get more points for killing and robbing people, or popular TV Shows such as the Sopranos where a murderous mafia crime boss is often portrayed as someone with a lot of money, power, "respect", influence, who is a ladies man, we must look at all forms of entertainment.

We must realize the fact that this generation is seeing more violence on television, hearing more violence on the radio waves, and playing more violent video games than any previous generation in history. If you add to that the fact that more kids are being raised in single parent homes and the accessibility to guns is on the rise, in conjunction with limited accessibility to youth employment and programs that actually challenge our youth culture, we are left with a recipe for disaster.

When I decided to disengage from gang life, I decided to try the road less traveled in my neighborhood. I decided to try and further my education by enrolling at Nassau Community College. I remember attending my first collegiate state wide conference. I was dumbfounded with what I saw. I remember seeing these groups of young men and women wearing distinct colors, insignias, and throwing up hand signs. They had choreographed handshakes, and at the end of the night these two different groups got into a violent altercation. Police had to be called, and people were injured. I remember looking in awe as someone asked me what was wrong and I stated that I could not believe that there were gangs in college. The person I was talking to laughed at me and said "those aren't gangs, they are fraternities and sororities."

That's when it all came into focus. If a young person joins a group by which they have to go through an initiation, and they have common colors, throw up hand signs, and do so because they want to be a

part of a group or for “networking” purposes, and they attend a college or university, it is called a fraternity or a sorority. Yet, if youth do the same thing in the community because they don’t have access to higher learning or because they come from a community with failing schools and limited resources, or broken homes looking to be a part of something, it is called a gang.

S.T.R.O.N.G.’s sole purpose is to provide alternatives to gang life in an effort to save our youth. We are not “anti-gang,” we are anti gang and youth violence. We are anti drugs; we are anti illegal activity that is destroying our community. We do not have anything against the gang involved youth, but seek to address the behavior in an effort to redirect young people.

We have established STRONG Chapters in the Uniondale & Roosevelt School District. The concept aims to build a counter culture to gang life. In order to deter gang membership it is necessary to provide a positive peer groups to replace gangs. It is mandated that all youth involved in our program are identified as either gang involved or affiliated by school administrators, self identification, law enforcement, or other source of referral, or be siblings of gang involved youth. Our goal is to provide them with an alternative to the street gang.

This program focuses on discouraging gang involvement by helping to develop positive life skills and peer groups, as well as providing them with a forecast of what the future holds for them should they choose a negative lifestyle over a positive one. We currently have over 130 youth enrolled in our chapters, and many school districts are interested in implementing our program. As a result of our data collection, this program will be evidence based by the end of the year. This program has enabled us to further develop other initiatives and strategies aimed specifically at reducing gang involvement and violent gang/gun crime. Below is a synopsis of some of our other programs.

STRONG TALK: STRONG provides workshops reaching thousands of youth, adults, and service providers throughout the North East on contemporary issues related to youth violence and gangs. We are speaking in elementary school classrooms with a focus on educating the young people on the dangers of being gang involved and following the destructive path.

STRONGIRLZ: Is an all-girls group where participants discuss gang issues and other contemporary issues as they pertain to females and violence. Females are the fastest growing prison population at this time and they have often been overlooked. The concept is to empower gang involved females with the tools, competencies and options necessary to avoid further gang involvement.

BUILDING STRONG YOUTH: Many youth find themselves feeling like there is no way out of gang life. This is an employment placement and career development program focused on intervening with youth involved in gangs. Upon intake, a psychosocial and employment assessment is implemented to determine youth needs, goals, and career and employment aspirations.

Services Provided: Job Placement & Sheltered Employment-youth are matched to employment opportunities congruent to their career interest and capacity. Some youth find it difficult to adhere to the demands of a job. Therefore sheltered employment is provided to selected participants as a bridge to other employment opportunities. Worksites are chosen to cultivate basic work ethics and skills.

S.T.R.O.N.G. University is a program that was created for the most entrenched gang involved youth who are unemployed, not enrolled in any educational or vocational program, served time in a correctional institution, and have a history of gang involvement. After undergoing a rigorous training process they design and implement presentations on youth violence and gang prevention in schools and communities throughout New York State. Participants also help STRONG develop and organize other gang prevention and intervention initiatives. Our goal is to take these current gang members that are trying to redirect their lives and use them as our ambassadors for peace and an end to violence in the community. These young people whom have been shot, stabbed, incarcerated, kicked out of their homes, etc. serve as real life examples of what happens if you remain involved in a gang. Most importantly however, they serve as an example that change, no matter how impossible it might seem, is very much a possibility should they choose to change.

S.T.R.O.N.G. is currently looking to replicate an effective intervention model from Los Angeles California. We will be hopefully launching a STRONG SCREEN Program before the end of the summer. The introduction of the STRONG SCREEN Program will provide gang involved youth with an entrepreneurial experience that will allow them to learn tangible/marketable employment skills, expose them to a competitive vocation and viable career option, as well as provide sustainability in funding for S.T.R.O.N.G. Youth, Inc.

The efficacy of this model and promotion of this type of industry cannot be overstated. HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES was developed through a screen printing business and thrives because of their Youth Enterprise Model which successfully provides gang members with the work ethic and competencies dictated by the corporate world! Founder and Executive Director Father Greg Boyle, exemplifies the

type of ingenuity it will take to create programs that are effective at reducing crime and gang involvement while engaging a hard to reach population. We have hosted Father Boyle and his staff on many occasions, and have visited with them in Los Angeles. It has been a great experience to not have to recreate the wheel and have the guidance of someone who has a model that works.

As stated by OJJDP: “The most effective intervention programs use employment, training, school-to-work, access to higher educational opportunities, use of community-based organizations and consistent contact.” In keeping with this framework, this initiative recognizes youth have inherent strengths to be cultivated given the appropriate approach, venue and opportunity. Integral to the services is access to support services, educational/vocational opportunities, life skills education, and career awareness. Another critical challenge factored into this model is the development of programs that prepare youth for jobs while also meeting their developmental needs.

As you can see, in an effort to truly be effective and save America’s youth and communities from the devastating effects of gang involvement we need to come up with innovative ideas that merge prevention and intervention strategies. It is vital to provide youth with alternatives to gang involvement if we want to be effective in reducing gang involvement and activity.

In closing, I must emphasize the fact that it is easier to get a young person to never join a gang, than it is to leave a gang once they are already entrenched in the criminal lifestyle. Although intervention is extremely important to the success of any gang reduction program, more of our energy needs to be channeled on developing innovative gang reduction curriculums and activities aimed at educating youth in elementary schools. The days of extra home work help and sport programs are simply not addressing the needs of these youth, and as a result it is vital that we adopt new tools focused on gang prevention.

Whenever gang members tell me there gang is a family, I tell them they are right. They often look at me in shock and I continue to tell them that they are an abusive family. They are the kind of family that beats you down from the moment you join. You are abused physically, mentally, you are stripped of hope and a future, and you are raped emotionally and transformed into someone you are not meant to be.

Gangs cannot provide lawful employment, vocational programs, educational degrees, and counseling. They could never nurture and care for young people in an effort to get them to live productive lives. We on the other hand, can. Yet currently we are sending our youth to new prisons and old schools. We are providing higher salaries for law enforcement officers without bachelor’s degrees, than for teachers and social workers in our schools with graduate degrees. We are expanding local county jails, but have no community centers that can keep our kids occupied in productive programs. What does it

say about us as a nation, when we make accessibility to corrections so much easier than learning institutions at a higher cost?

We declared a war on poverty. That didn't work out too well. We declared a war on drugs. We have yet to win that war. Let's not declare a war on gangs. Instead, let us declare peace on our youth. After all, they are our children and they need us now more than ever.

Respectfully yours,

Sergio Argueta

Executive Director & Founder

S.T.R.O.N.G. Youth, Inc.