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## **KEEPING KIDS CLEAN/Youths Find Alternatives to Trouble**

By BARBARA KARKABI - Staff

GALVESTON - The white van slowly headed down Broadway, filled with excited teen-agers singing animatedly and rocking to the sounds of rap blaring out over the radio.

"Y'all want a picture?" someone shouted out. Heads turned, grins appeared and Shawanda Haynes, better known as Archie, did a little dance for the camera. Everyone laughed and kept on singing.

**Ernest McMillan** smiled, shook his head and drove the van into the parking lot of the Pizza Inn on 68th Street. The mood of the 14 teens, headed for a festive lunch where they would hook up with other members of their group, couldn't have been better. They were celebrating both an end and a beginning.

Ending was the youth summer job program, in which 19 minority teens, many from Galveston's public housing projects, worked long, hot days in the summer sun, making jokes and cementing friendships. At first, their summer dreams were small ones - staying off the street and out of trouble, avoiding the gangs and maybe buying some school clothes or helping their moms with the rent.

But they were also celebrating the beginning of bigger dreams through their newly formed leadership development and social club: Future Leaders of Tomorrow. Now they talk about being doctors, nurses, computer technicians, lawyers, store owners. They believe they can do it, with the help of their summer friendships, the backing of their club and a few caring adults.

A petite, soft-spoken 14-year-old, Neece Beal sounds sad when she talks about what has happened to some of her friends over the last year.

"I'm so tired of going to funerals. I've gone to eight or nine over the past year of teen-agers. I knew them well; I don't understand why they are killing each other," she says. "But I think it starts in the home. They're not getting love at home, so they get it in gangs."

Beal and the other teens hope that their club will get more kids involved and entice them away from the lure of the streets and gangs.

McMillan, who worked in Galveston for the first time this summer, took a leave of absence from his job as program coordinator with Houston's ***Fifth Ward Enrichment Program***. The summer work program, funded by the Job Training Partnership Act, has been around for a number of years, he explains. What made this year different was the collaborative effort between the JTPA program and the Galveston Housing Authority.

As in years past, the teens worked and had classes in reading and math skills. But after 3:30 p.m., the GHA youth development project kicked in and included leadership training, field trips, core bonding between the teens and formation of the club.

The Future Leaders of Tomorrow is an outgrowth of another club started last August for younger teens by McMillan's friend and colleague Omowale Luthuli. A longtime Houston activist, Luthuli saw a need for a club for older teens and called on McMillan for help.

Luthuli's own Galveston involvement began about a year ago, when GHA executive director Walter Norris Jr. heard about his work. For years, Luthuli has worked with inner-city youths in programs such as Communities in Schools, Shape Community Center and the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program. Norris asked Luthuli to use some of his techniques with at-risk children in Galveston's public housing projects. Thanks to several federal anti-drug and gang prevention grants, Norris says, the money was there. All Luthuli had to do was create a program.

#### Finding the boys

He also had to find some boys willing to join. Not at all familiar with the territory, Luthuli began by strolling around the projects with names like Oleander and Magnolia Homes, Palm and Cedar Terraces. As he walked, he talked to various boys he encountered, asking if they would be interested in joining a club.

"I basically threw out a net. I tried to approach clusters of boys that looked like they were together," Luthuli says. "I told them the purpose of the club and its activities - that it was a manhood development club that would help build young men into responsible adults, and that in the process of doing that we would have some fun. Some of the kids you could tell thought the idea was a little square, but others were real interested. Whoever gave me a bite, that's who I called. "

One of the boys he encountered on his walks was Apollo Wells, now 14, who immediately liked the idea.

"Mr. Omowale told us the club was for us, to help us stay off the streets, out of the gangs and to keep us from doing drugs," said Wells, who is now the GHA Manhood Development Club's treasurer. "There's a lot of people involved in the gangs; it's scary. I wanted to try and stay out of the gangs."

So far, Wells and the 20 or so other core members of the group have stayed away from gangs and worked hard on avoiding fights. Some of the boys Luthuli selected had already either carried

weapons or had contact with roving gangs. But in the past year, Luthuli says, only one of the boys has gotten in trouble with police. He was allowed to stay in the club and is receiving special attention.

In some ways, Luthuli and McMillan say, the situation in Galveston is worse than what they have encountered in Houston because gang activity is more concentrated in a smaller area and there is less economic mobility. But they also have found positive aspects.

Youths still have hope

"The young people are very malleable, and they still have hope," Luthuli said. "Plus the Galveston Housing Authority is doing a stellar job and allowing us to do some innovative programs. But Galveston needs a lot more of the kinds of things Ernie and I are doing."

Luthuli's first hurdle was the location of club headquarters, some unused space in Palm Terrace, now decorated with anti-gang and anti-drug posters. The boys from other housing projects were convinced they could not go there safely and that kids from the different areas, including some from outside the projects, would never mix, because they just never had. But one year later, the camaraderie is high and there's no mention of any rivalries.

Luthuli eventually had to restrict the club's age range from 11 to 15, with a few younger boys included, because the older and younger teens did not mix well. Some of the older teens, he found, were already hardened by violence and contact with gangs and needed to be worked with separately. That's when he called **McMillan** for help with older youth.

**McMillan's** first trip to club headquarters was an eye-opener. Unaware of the colors associated with different gangs, he wore blue to Galveston's Palm Terrace, considered "red country."

"I was totally naive. I couldn't figure out why all these guys were staring at me. One was even looking at me through binoculars," McMillan recalls with a rueful laugh. "One of the boys said, 'Are you trying to get killed?' On the way back to Houston, I started shaking. It's a new kind of prejudice for me; it used to be the color of your skin, now it's the color you wear."

But things improved rapidly after that experience, McMillan says.

Before their recent celebration lunch, McMillan gathered the teens in a semicircle. They talked about the films and documentaries they've seen together, the essays they've written and the field trips taken to places like WaterWorld and an Astros game.

Pride in earning money

And then, of course, there was the money that came from participation in the summer jobs program. Having a job and getting paid, the teens say, gave them pride and self-esteem. It made them feel good to help their families out and to prove that they could get up and report to work every morning. Not all of the 21 selected finished out the summer. But even those who

quit or were terminated can still be involved in the club and are encouraged to do so, McMillan says.

If not for the program, most admit, they would have spent their summer looking for work, hanging out or maybe getting into trouble.

They know plenty of kids who make easy money selling drugs on the streets, but that's a path they are all trying hard to avoid.

The smiles fade when the talk inevitably turns to the violence on the street, a factor these teenagers deal with every day. When McMillan asks how many of them have seen people shot or hurt, just about all of them raise their hands.

Earlier in the week, Eddie Perez, 14, had witnessed a drive-by shooting. The amiable teen describes walking back from the corner store when a man walking next to him was shot.

"The people at the car were just aiming at anyone," Perez said. "The guy was just unfortunate; it could have been me. I was scared all the way home. It's something you think about all the time."

But this summer, the teens felt like they really made a difference. One of their favorite activities was a "Stop the Violence Rally," a locally sponsored event held in July. The group hopes to keep the momentum going with a talent show they are planning for Sept. 11. They see it as a way to make money for their club and to attract more members. Although the Future Leaders of Tomorrow club was started by teens in the summer work program, it is open to all interested teens.

McMillan and Luthuli plan to eventually turn the clubs over to Galvestonians to run. But for now, they're heavily involved. They will respond

"I don't know how some kids can survive with what they have seen," McMillan says. "But when people spend quality time and have a goal in mind, the children will respond."

It's Tuesday evening, and Luthuli is having his regular meeting with a group of 14 boys from the GHA Manhood Development Club. He's showing them film clips from "Glory," a film about black soldiers in the Civil War, and "Juice," which deals with inner-city gangs. He talks to them about some of the deeper issues involved.

"Those men in "Glory" are our ancestors, and they fought for our freedom. These are people we say would turn over in their graves over the thought of boys selling drugs," Luthuli says. "Juice" takes place in a gang-ridden neighborhood. You need to know who your running buddies are because they can get you in a lot of trouble or even get you in a box 10 feet under. When school starts, I want you to remember that."

The boys nod in agreement and fidget in excited anticipation of the next event. Tonight they will be "buying" things from the club store. Luthuli has set up a token economy in which the boys

get points by attending club meetings and doing community service, such as helping older folks and keeping the neighborhoods clean. Tonight they are reclaiming their points and getting things like sleeping bags, Walkmans, a basketball and cans of soda.

One boy tells Luthuli that a club member not present that night has managed to stay out of a fight and helped prevent it from escalating. Luthuli makes a note and plans to give him some points if the story is true. Violence prevention is something he is always stressing.

"I take them shopping at the malls and I see how people look at them, and I know that the patience of society is running out for these boys, and I tell them they have to change their behavior," Luthuli says. "They need to understand this."

Thanks to Luthuli, who has become a father figure to the boys, the message is beginning to get through.

"We already see a marked difference in the kids who have gotten involved in the program, thanks to the work of Ernest and Omowale," says Norris. "We believe we will be able to follow these kids and show them as successes."