

# Woonsocket

## School program takes a hard look at violence

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Woonsocket Middle School students listen to Steve Berman as he shows them where he was shot in the head.

The Providence Journal / Bob Thayer Bob Thayer

WOONSOCKET — Real families won't ask you to kill people, Lt. John Reis told the rapt sixth graders, and they won't make you sell drugs to support their lifestyle.

They won't beat you up to welcome you into the family, and they won't run for their lives as you lay dying from a gunshot wound, he said.

What they will do, Reis said, is gather at the street corner where you got killed. Then, crying, they'll light candles and bring flowers, and pour beer onto the pavement in your honor. Your fellow gang members will then wear "Rest in Peace" T-shirts bearing your picture and the date you got shot.

Gangs aren't your family, Reis told the students at Woonsocket Middle School, and they don't "have your back."

"They're not there to help you, they are there to hurt you," he said.

The assembly, one of three held last week to address youth and gang violence, was scheduled after a possibly gang-related feud between Laotian groups from Providence and Woonsocket erupted outside the middle school last month. In the second fight, a 14-year-old Woonsocket boy wearing brass-knuckles allegedly beat a 15-year-old Providence boy.

The incidents had school and police officials in both cities scrambling to address youth violence, and Reis, a former Providence police officer who runs the Partnership to Address Violence through Education, was asked to help. Reis said his goal is to prevent any retaliation and cut down on the growth of existing groups.

From the workshop last week, it was clear that many students have already been touched by violence. Asked how many students in the audience have T-shirts depicting a slain loved one, at least 10 students quietly raised their hands.

Reis introduced Steve Berman, a friend who is paralyzed on the left side after being shot in the head.

Standing before students with his left arm and leg hanging lifeless at his side, Berman, 34, said he was shot in the head 20 years ago after beating up Vinny, a classmate who tried to sell drugs to Berman's little brother.

"I walked up to him and beat him up so bad that I put him in the hospital," Berman said.

Vinny returned to school with a .22-caliber pistol, which three of Berman's friends saw but failed to tell anyone about. Berman, who had a 1-percent chance of living, walked among the students, inviting them to feel a bump which he said is actually a bullet lodged in the back of his head.

"I'm living proof that silence hurts. The day I was shot, people were silent, and I'm hurting for life," he said.

If funds permit, Reis said hopes to hold workshops for sixth graders, "dinner conversations" with students and parents, professional development for teachers and police officers, and sessions for students who have received detention or are on school suspension.

Reis said he is trying to get the Providence and the Woonsocket teens to agree to a truce and participate in an intramural football league. The Woonsocket youths have already agreed, he said.

So there's work ahead, but there's also hope. 13-year-old Hector Rodriguez said Reis' message hit home.

"It's just like scary," he said, "I don't want to join a gang."

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