

More Important Than Hip-Hop

Written by Robert and NiKKi ID1478
Thursday, 02 June 2005 10:47 -

It is no big secret that gang life is part of the hip-hop culture in many areas. Rap artists rap about gangs and gang life; some even rap about their gang affiliations. As members of the hip-hop community we are aware of the status that gang life has in many areas. To a lot of members and affiliates, things change and some see that they need to change their lives to meet the future growth of themselves or their family.

There are many organizations in the LA area that are doing something more than talking about what needs to be done and pointing fingers.

It seems that those who do not understand street life or the importance of gang life, to some; are eager to just throw up their hands and give up on the youth or the older member who might have got hung up in his younger day and is now just getting a chance at life. To most of the un-understanding, locking them all up would be a good answer of what to do about something they fail to understand.

I am not going to 'glorify' gang life or gang members but I will respect them as people; not because of what they represent, or the sect they are claiming but because of who they are; the man or woman that is behind that sect, the real person.

I will not 'glorify' the Thug Life that many rappers rap about, but I will say that I understand that people get hung up and things go bad sometimes. And if we just give up on a person because we don't understand them, then we should also give up on our self's.

The late west coast rap icon Tupac Shakur is one rap artist who is thought of when you mention Thug Life. "I didn't create T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E., I diagnosed it," Tupac Shakur said.

But Tupac also worked on making a change in the community. In 1992 at the 'Truc Picnic' in Cali, Tupac was instrumental in getting rival members of the Crips and Bloods to sign the 'Code Of THUG LIFE'.

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Tupac and Dr. Mutulu Shakur had helped write up the 'code', with help from other 'og's'. The Code of THUG LIFE is listed [HERE](#) . It details do's and don'ts for being a righteous thug and banger. Although this code is not really followed today it was a start, and it is something that should be followed today by the new generation of 'bangers'. It showed commitment to people, and a caring for those who were not 'involved' in what is going on in a particular area.

That is what is needed, commitment to all people. Gang members are fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and friends. They are human beings and have 'worth' to someone.

May 21, 2004 a historic ceasefire initiative between the Bloods and Crips was signed. [The Final Call](#) ran the following article By Corey Muhammad that shows the peace treaty holds one year later. This is a great accomplishment and should be read by all.

Since the age of 9, the only life Machete has known is that of gangs. In the last 365 days alone, the 24-year-old has lost no less than four "homies" to gang-related violence. He has had enough. Following a series of meetings with Saving Our Selves (SOS), he decided it was time for his set of Bloods to do what they should have done a long time ago.

During the one year anniversary celebration of the May 21, 2004 historic ceasefire initiative between the Bloods and Crips here, Machete was joined on stage by members of SOS, activists and community and religious leaders, as his pen stroke officially added Red Dog Piru gang set to the list of signatories of the agreement.

His decision was not a difficult one, he said. In the past year, he has matured to a point where he was able to see that he was in a no win situation. "We weren't winning what we were doing," he admitted.

From the time the treaty was signed last May, SOS has worked hard to change the image and perception of gangs throughout the city. Co-Founder Byron Kelley admits their efforts have been slowly progressing—they're about halfway to where they would like to be—but the organization has been able to make some strides and is headed in the right direction. Red Dog Piru is the only set to sign the treaty since it was first introduced and brings the total number of signatories to nine.

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With the help of Newark Public School's Superintendent Marion Bolden, members of SOS have secured jobs at Barringer High School, where they lecture and counsel students about the pitfalls of gang life. They have also traveled and counseled youngsters in other cities.

The group's efforts and determination have also led to inroads within the Newark Police Department. An adversarial relationship with the city's police department has improved since a meeting with Police Director Anthony Ambrose earlier this year, and they have even taken their message before lawyers and judges.

The Deputy Director of Essex County Detention Center, Keith Muhammad Abu Bark Ali, has been so impressed with SOS's work that he promised to invite them to the center to help ease the tensions. Right now, the situation is too volatile, but he said the city is working on new high-tech ways to enable the ceasefire to work inside the prisons.

In order for the ceasefire to work, everyone is going to have to play a part, said Sergeant Michael Gillens of the Newark Police Department. He is a 20-year veteran of the department and said he has seen a positive difference since the truce was signed.

However, all of this pales in comparison to the difference they say they have been able to make in the lives of some of the youth with whom they have come into contact.

"We saved a lot of lives, stopped a lot of shootings," said Co-Founder Kevin Tate. The group doesn't keep any records of the incidents where they have been directly involved, but he says there have been quite a few times they have stepped in to quell violence.

Since forming SOS, he has had to deal with the kind of frustrations not commonly found on the streets—most notably, the lack of resources available to his group in order to accomplish all their goals. Despite the setbacks, he says it has ultimately helped him. He has developed beyond what he imagined.

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"It made me a better person, as far as me learning how to deal with people instead of just blow off the handle. I know how to deal with my kids better too," Mr. Tate explained. "I've learned how to negotiate and mediate, too. I know how to talk to people and approach them in their own way," he added.

The lack of resources was a problem echoed by Newark Deputy Mayor Ras Baraka, who worked with the street organizations for two years before the treaty was finally signed.

"We need greater resources and more people to bring our community back where it needs to be. If we can do that, we can bring our community back in a small period of time," he said.

The work over the past year has raised everyone's level of consciousness and exposed members to things they otherwise would never have experienced, according to Mr. Baraka. He cited the December meeting with the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan and other national leaders as an example. It all has had a positive effect on members of SOS.

"I think it changed their outlook on their own ability to affect what's going on in the community themselves," he said. "I think before they may have thought that they had no power to make any real changes in their neighborhoods and their communities, but I think now they feel like if they come together and put their minds to it, they can make some real changes in their neighborhoods," he added.

When the idea of a treaty was first discussed three years ago, Nation of Islam Minister, Michael Muhammad, opened the doors of Muhammad's Mosque No. 25 in Newark as a safe haven for gang members to work out issues and disputes. He says the level of commitment expressed by SOS to live up to the tenets of the treaty is noble. Being able to withstand the personal and organizational pressures that was and is pulling them away from the truce is something that needs to be commended. "Something like this is monumental because it represents the overcoming of systemic destruction," he added.

The group's work is something that they all can be proud of, shared another co Founder. Dressed completely in red, it was easy to tell to which street organization Ali Doer belonged.

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“I finally accomplished something that was meaningful. We planned and prepared for this type of environment for this city and we’re determined to be successful,” he said.

After serving nearly four years on a gun possession charge, Mr. Doer was released three months before the ceasefire agreement was signed. He is now the main subject of a documentary, set for release in August, that will be an accurate portrayal of life in street organizations, he revealed. Though shy at first, Mr. Doer opened up about his visions for SOS in the coming year.

“I would like to see the city respect SOS as an organization and as a movement,” he said. Sounding more like a politician, he also offered his vision for Black people: “Let’s take over Newark and generate ownership in the community. We take our money to everybody, but very little of our money is being generated back to our people. Let’s spend our money with ourselves. Let’s network to keep our people together.”

As the families of both organizations mingled during the celebration at Military Park—some enjoying the grill that was set up, while Bloods and Crips squared off during a football game—Kim Wimbush turned her thoughts to her son. The young mother said her son’s father is a gang member and she is nervous about the direction he may take once he is a little older. “I’m scared for him, I’m scared for all the young people coming up,” she said.

Eleven-year-old Arughkay chimed in, “There is really nothing wrong with being in a gang, but being in gang activities is bad,” he said. “They’re good people, but sometimes they do bad things. I can be in a gang, but I won’t do any bad things.”

Machete agrees with little Arughkay. For the foreseeable future, peace is the only thing he has on his mind. “Peace is the only thing I hope to accomplish,” he said. “Homies on the other side, they can respect us and we can respect them, then we won’t lose so many homies to senseless crimes.”

David Muhammad contributed to this story.

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