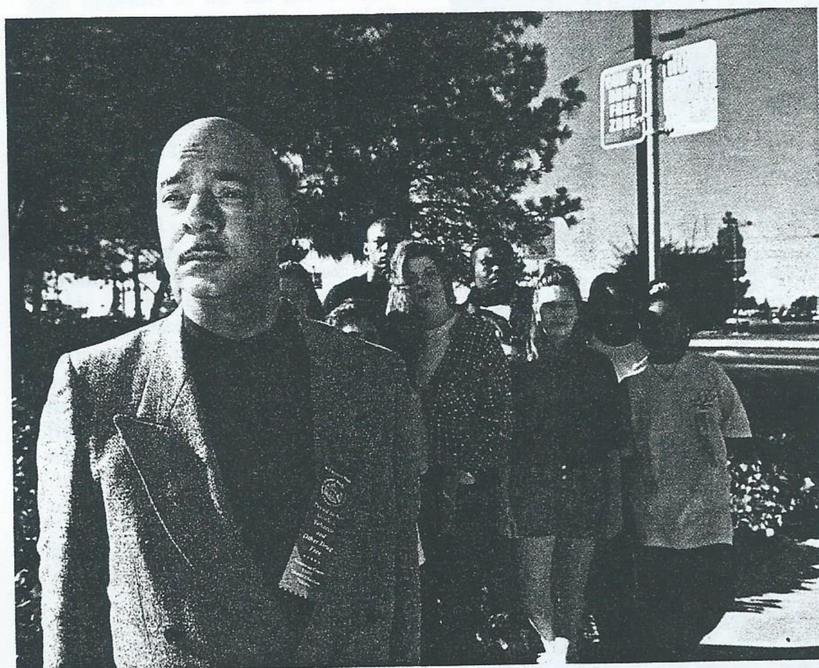
BY SIGRID BATHEN

From probation and police officers to educators and parents, Sacramentans are moving to stop juvenile crime before it starts.

Diversion Tactics



Three years ago, Gerald L. Bryant took four young Sacramento gang members to hear Maya Angelou speak at the Sacramento Community Center. Before that, none of the young men had known anything about the prominent writer and actress. Neither had they visited the community center, or the Hyatt Regency hotel where Bryant took them after the speech.

"That was the first time these young men had been downtown to a hotel," he recalls. "They were just astounded at the beauty, the vastness, the cleanliness of the hotel. It just overpowered them when they walked in the door." It was Bryant's way of showing them a world outside their own. "One of them told me that I can't tell him anything about his 'hood. I told him he was absolutely right, I can't tell him about his 13-block neighborhood, but that I'd like to show him the 14th block."

Bryant runs a program at Luther Burbank High School to keep kids away from drugs and gangs. Of the four young men he took downtown—all students at Grant Union High School, where Bryant was then working in a youth program funded by Burger King—Bryant says one was killed in a gang fight, one moved away from Sacramento, and the other two are still in school. He figures they are representative of what he calls his "50 percent win ratio" as he attempts to intervene in the lives of young people drawn to drugs, guns and crime, trying to keep them in school, helping them find work, showing them options and a world beyond their " 'hood."

Like many activists in the burgeoning but financially and emotionally precarious field of juvenile crime diversion, Bryant is in his fourth year with the Burbank drug-free zone project, goes far beyond the requirements of a 9-to-5 routine. He gets *involved* with the kids he tries to help. And he has no illusions that he can help them all. "A long time ago I realized you can't save 'em all. I used to think we could. There are some young people, if they're not ready to accept change, it won't work. So I focus on those individuals where you can make a difference."

Bryant expresses no surprise at the influence of youth gangs on impressionable, confused, hormonally raging kids, who often lack strong support systems, sometimes *any* support systems, at home. "Gangs will tell you that they will love you and they will die for you," says Bryant, recalling a conference he attended where a young gang member from Detroit explained the gangs' appeal with a chilling illustration:

"He asked the kids how many of their parents told them that they love them, and half of the hands went up. He asked them how many of their parents would die for them, and no hands went up."

Bryant's program, operated by the Sacramento City Unified School District with a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, is one of eight demonstration projects in California in which "drug-free zones" are established in high-crime areas frequented by children. "At Burbank, we have signs posted, which designate this a drug- *and* gun-free

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICK BARRETO

zone," says Bryant. Violators are subject to "enhanced penalties" if caught.

The project emphasizes prevention and counseling, tutoring and job training. "Sixty percent of our students will not go on to college," says Bryant. "We have to prepare these students to develop a skill or a trade." Teaching unskilled, non-college-bound teenagers how to find a job often requires innovative approaches. "I talk to a number of young ladies who are pregnant," Bryant says. "They say they wanted to have someone they can love unconditionally—and that they don't want to be a secretary. They don't know that they don't *have* to be a secretary. They can go into plumbing or pipe fitting, or some other nontraditional job. We try to tap into their interests so we can get them into programs to develop a skill or a trade."

Bryant is involved in numerous local youth programs, often as a volunteer, and believes strongly that community activism can have an impact on youthful misbehavior. "There is a misconception about drugs and gangs, that this is an inner-city phenomenon," he says. "I have been up and down these United States and across this country, and I have seen no community that is immune."

He credits his own upbringing in McKeesport, near Pittsburg, Penn., with defining his views. "When I was little, my mother had me in everything you could put a child in, from Boy Scouts to Bible school. That shaped my view that when you have kids actively involved in things, when they get older they will want to give back what they were given."

SACRAMENTO COUNTY Sheriff's Deputy Donald Northcross, founder of the highly successful OK ("Our Kids") program in Rancho Cordova, this year will see his first young charges—the young African-American males he started working with at Mills Junior High School as eighth-graders four years ago—graduate from Cordova High School. It is a milestone of enormous satisfaction to Northcross, who has seen at least 300 young men go through the OK program, which he started on his own time and is now assigned to full time by Sheriff Glen Craig.

Emphasizing tough standards—regular attendance, good grades, exemplary behavior—OK also offers big rewards for successful completion, including a trip to Disneyland or Great America, outings to Kings games, and free use of the Rancho Arroyo Sports Complex on Saturday afternoons (after study hall and lunch).

Using a volunteer mentor approach, OK recruits and trains volunteers who agree to work one-on-one with several kids—counseling, encouraging, and taking immediate action to change conduct when kids stray from the high homework, school and behavior standards. "I visit classrooms, I talk to teachers," says Northcross. "I'll pull the kid out of class and talk to him if he's acting up." The Saturday study halls are followed by regular discussion groups, Northcross says, on topics such as "cultural awareness, gangs and the importance of not becoming a teenage father."

Expanded this year to include high school students, the program is still limited by funding to young African-American males, a high-risk group for later criminal behavior. Northcross believes it would be equally successful with girls and other ethnic groups. "I'd like to see it in every school," he says.

Kids join the program because they *want* to join. The field trips and reward system don't hurt. "My mom always used to say you can't clean a fish until you catch him," says Northcross. "We catch 'em, then we work on cleaning 'em."

Referrals come by word of mouth. "All the kids have heard about the program by now, and the little brothers can't wait to get in." He has never had a dropout.

Kids with various patterns join the program. "Success may mean one thing to one student, and something else to another," says Northcross. "He's not cursing the teachers, he's learning social skills, coming to class—you have to see success in those areas before you can do well in math and English."

Northcross, who has been with the sheriff's department for six years, says he "wanted to go into law enforcement since I was a kid" growing up in Ashdown, Ark. (pop. 3,500), where there were no black police officers. "There were always men in my community who provided opportunities for young people—Boy Scouts, baseball, hay rides. I thought that was part of being an adult, keeping kids busy, providing opportunities for them. I've always wanted to work with young people."

YOUTH DIVERSION and crime prevention programs are operated throughout the Sacramento area by a sometimes confusing array of law enforcement, education and community groups. Sacramento's three top law enforcement officials—Sheriff Craig, Police Chief Arturo Venegas and Sacramento County District Attorney Steve White—are strongly supportive of prevention programs and have in one way or another incorporated that support into existing, though badly underfunded, law enforcement efforts to deter crime through neighborhood policing. The trend toward "community-oriented policing," though aimed more at enforcement than youth diversion, includes a strong prevention message: police go after crime at its roots in the community, get to know community residents and are present as a force of authority as well as a source of help.

Community-based policing, with outreach or "storefront" centers in crime-prone locations, allows police to "do more with less," says Venegas, whose department recently followed the sheriff's department as a recipient of a major, highly competitive national grant to pump federal money into neighborhood policing. "The officers bring a lot of resources into those neighborhoods. If you take a look at what's been done in New Helvetia and River Oaks, it's not soft-on-crime stuff, but it's made a difference with kids." In addition to "putting some of the bad guys in jail," Venegas says neighborhood officers work with other youth programs, helping to get kids into tutoring and counseling, serving as role models for young people. "The payoff is not just a quick fix. The payoff will be in the long haul, when some of these kids are going to see that crime doesn't pay and education does."

Law enforcement and probation officials often point to changes in state law, enacted in the 1970s, to separate so-called "status offenders"—kids detained for noncriminal offenses such as running away (often from an abusive or neglectful home environment), curfew violation, truancy—from more hard-core juvenile criminals. They say those changes, though laudable in the abstract, mean that intervention comes too late in too many cases, and is ineffective when it does because the juvenile offender is already far down the road of criminal behavior before suffering any serious penalty.

"Twenty years later, we have the kids we kicked out into the streets," says Venegas. "Guess what? They're parents now. They didn't have structure in their lives when they were kids, and they don't have structure now. It shouldn't surprise us that violence has gone up, that offenders are getting younger and younger. We can't do anything to them and they realize that."

Like other law enforcement officials, Venegas favors an overhaul of the juvenile justice system that includes early intervention perhaps even placement of runaways and other status offenders in a "secure facility" where they will get help, as well as swift penalties for kids committing criminal acts.

Robert Keldgord, who has been Sacramento County's Chief Probation Officer since 1978, is a strong believer in early intervention, and an equally strong critic of what he calls "a prison mentality in this state that just won't stop." Although it has been on the budgetary chopping block several times, Keldgord has preserved one of the major local diversion programs—the award-winning Neighborhood Alternative Center operated by the Probation Department at 3201 Florin-Perkins Rd.—which provides counseling and intervention for families and kids in crisis *before* a kid commits a crime. The center serves an estimated 2,500–3,500 young people and their families each year. Reliable statistical followup is difficult, but Chief Deputy Probation Officer Mike Elorduy, who runs the center, says most of the young people seen at the center do not go on to commit crimes.

"It aims at those kids who have not yet violated the law in the truest sense," says Keldgord. "They haven't stolen anything. They haven't hurt anybody. They may be chipping away at drugs. They are runaways, beyond parental control, curfew violators—a general pain in the - - -."

Kids come to the center with their parents or are brought there by police; often, Elorduy says, "highly frustrated"

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parents come into the center without their kids, looking for help. Elorduy's staff includes seven probation officers who are also trained as counselors. "Normally our initial contact is a parent who is having trouble with control, the child is refusing discipline. . . . We try to identify problems, help parents deal with them, keep them out of the system."

Like other juvenile crime experts, Elorduy says he would like to see the system intervene even sooner. "I'd like to see three fourths of our families when the kids were 4 or 5 instead of 14 or 15. We have a lot of kids who were abused sexually or physically, although the primary source of abuse is emotional abuse."

And, like others who work with kids, Elorduy and Keldgord say the number of young people who commit serious crimes is growing, as is their lack of remorse about their actions. "We are seeing more violent, more hostile, more screwed-up kids than used to be the case," says Keldgord, who started his career nearly 40 years ago as a probation officer in Alameda County. "You used to get kids for bicycle theft—a burglary was a big deal. In the nine years I was with Alameda County, I saw one juvenile homicide case. Now on any given day in Sacramento County, you'll see maybe 25 juvenile homicide cases [in custody]. We have 275–285 kids in juvenile hall, and 10 percent are there for homicide.

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BRUCE LAMASTER was a successful businessman in 1983 when his 2-year-old daughter was killed in an automobile accident. Grief-stricken, he began to evaluate his life's goals, which included "being a millionaire by the time I was 30." He decided "making money was not on the top of my list." In 1984, he sold his trucking business to work with Campus Life, a division of the nondenominational Youth for Christ, and in 1986 organized the Youth Guidance Connection. LaMaster focuses on kids aged 5–19, training teenagers in job skills and placing staff in apartment buildings in crime-prone areas to develop activities for kids.

Young people are referred to the program by the Probation Department. Not everyone is accepted into the teen program. "They have to want to change," says LaMaster. The program offers an eight-week "life skills" class, which teaches everything from respecting authority to balancing a checkbook, and a four-week employment counseling course.

LaMaster recalls one young man, now 19, who was referred to Youth Guidance when he was 17. A longtime gang member with a bullet hole in his neck from a gang fight that nearly killed him, LaMaster says, he was raised "in the streets," did time in juvenile institutions, and fathered five children.

He completed the life skills class, and when it came time to get a job, LaMaster recalls, "One of our staff took him out and bought him a shirt and tie. He walked around for a while feeling silly. Now we can't get him to take it off. He interviewed for three jobs and was offered three. He took a busboy job." He moved his family (his five children and the mother of four of them) to an apartment in a neighborhood far from his old gang haunts. "The kids [aged 2-1/2–7] are going to school, and the mom and dad are also going to school to get their diplomas."

LaMaster is relentlessly nonjudgmental in his dealings with the youths he helps. "I have met so many kids over the years who are absolutely no different than probably the majority of students at Sac State, with the exception of the neighborhood they grew up in, the attitude of their home and their friends.

"All I can do is what I feel is the right thing. I don't become cynical or depressed because I see kids changing. I can see them changing in front of me. I can see a very sweet, young child who was never given the opportunity to be a kid." ▼