

FRESH START, from page 10

Violence Prevention Office. "It's a protection. For some folks it's someone that has cared about them. ... Family is the people who love you."

That cultural vulnerability was the focus of a recent report by Portland State University's Center to Advance Racial Equality titled "What risks do African youth face of gang involvement? A community needs assessment in Multnomah County" released in 2014.

That report noted that young African Portlanders straddling two cultures while still in their formative years are particularly vulnerable to joining or forming gangs for affiliation and protection.

"A lot of the youth, they have cultural shock," says Abdiasis Mohamed, Africa House's operations manager. "Looking for identity where they don't know and they struggle keeping the African identity because it's no longer resonant with the cultural norm here."

The pull between preserving one's own culture and assimilating to American culture can be trying, Mohamed says.

"When you're getting made fun of because you're not from here or because you dress a certain way or because you don't speak like the other people," says staff member Yetu Dumbia. "Those things lead kids to violence, especially if violence is what they've known for their whole life living in refugee camps."

When youths finally do find that sense of belonging and protection, disconnecting from gang life can be a long, dangerous and heartbreaking process. IRCO's African Gang Prevention/Intervention project works to intervene in kids' lives before they ever get to that point, says Dumbia.

For Portland's African immigrant and refugee youths, Muhamed says, the stakes are high.

"If you're only a green card holder and you get arrested, that's it," Muhamed says. "You're not going to become a citizen in this country anymore. As an immigrant, once you go to jail, you serve your time, the next thing on your list is deportation."

At its outset, the goal of the project was to intervene in the lives of 55 to 60 students

at risk of joining a gang. Currently, however, there are about 70 kids in the program ages 11 to 24, with more referrals coming into Africa House every day, and staff are racing to keep up with the project's demand.

"What we are in large need of is mentors for those kids, and preferably people that look like them," says Dumbia. "We need tutors. We need people that will care for them, basically, and that will help them with little things, like a resume or how to even get a job or how to be a good student. It's those little things that people take for granted here."

Peavey voiced similar pleas of increased awareness and concern from the community in regards to Portland's gangs.

"People who have been encumbered by gang violence, they see the need there," he says. "But we need greater support from businesses, we need greater support from organizations that are not at the table right now. And we have great people at the table right now. But we need more."

Among the others at the table are IRCO's vast network of community leaders; Portland's community violence reduction initiative, Enough is Enough; and the East African All-Stars, a group of Somali American teens who have created their own basketball league.

Still, Peavey and Edwards fear prevalent stereotypes about gang members will keep the wider Portland community from making youth violence prevention a priority.

"When you deny folks and then you judge them and you put them in this box," says Edwards, "that's dehumanizing."

As for IRCO, the pilot program is set to last through May, when the state will assess its effectiveness and look at what changes need to be made.

As for Jacques, he enjoys being in the program and hopes to continue on with a mentor into college. But if all goes as planned, someday soon he will outgrow his mentor and become one himself. And while the search for identity is for many a neverending one, Jacques already knows one thing for sure.

"There is nothing wrong with African American," he says, "but I like to see myself as African because I'm really proud of where I come from."

Funeral Procession

by Mike Vance

The dead walk by
Another lost soul
Passes the window
Trash bag draped over shoulder
Sadness and grief
Lost in place
Pacing, pacing, pacing
No where to go
All day to get there
Sorrow and gut wrenched tears
Tried to quell it with
A thousand beers
The tears held back by pride
Give way to wrath
And his icy stare
Pierces the concrete buildings
Sawing them to pieces
With his laser like vision -
A love lost
Tipped him over the brink
Now all he can do
Is think, think, try not to think
Drink, drink, and try not to drink
Till the blessed day comes
When he can fight no more.
He roams the streets dying for more.

Sisters Of The Road

a non-profit cafe in Old Town since 1979



"This is a place where
we are connected,
and what is shared is
honored and celebrated."
--Sisters Customer

133 NW Sixth Ave.
Portland, OR 97209

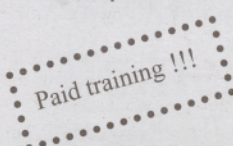
main: 503 222 5694
<http://sistersoftheroad.org>

All are welcome.**Monday - Friday 10am-2:30pm**

5312 NE 148th Ave.
Portland, OR 97230

Free career training for persons with disabilities in janitorial and building maintenance

- Requirements:
- Documented proof of disability
 - Proficiency in understanding and speaking English
 - Pass criminal background check
 - Pass drug test



Disabilities: Physical, mental health, intellectual, developmental, and learning

Questions ?

Please Call: (503) 261-1266
or (800) 874-7917
email: careers@phcnw.com