

It Takes a Village

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reminder of a long history of the community's gang-related violence.

Kids getting into trouble could have expected a lecture on non-violence during the session, but responsibility was directed at adults.

"We don't have a child problem, we have an adult problem," said Thomson. "Young boys need father figures and young ladies need mothers."

As the topic fueled frustration, adults in the room took charge of the conversation.

One godmother of several children scolded the group, "Parent your child, don't let your child come and kill me!"

Thompson obligated parents to take action against those kids who may be acting out of desperation, by giving them the love and attention they deserve and showing them you care.

"We forget that our children are people we can talk to. They need to be listened to, talked to, and need to know that they are loved," said Thompson's mother, Taren Jackson.

Royal Harris, a mental health liaison for gang affiliated offenders contracted by the Department of Community Justice and Cascadia Behavioral Health, took the microphone next.

Harris asked the young folks in the crowd to raise their hand if they knew someone who had been killed, in a abusive relationship, or knew where to get drugs. For each scenario, more than half of hands were up.

"See, kids aged 10-18 have access to everything we don't want them to have," said Harris.

Bridging an obvious dialogue gap between parents and children in the audience, he continued, "We have to make time for our children. We are the ones that have to be the guardians of the block, and provide protection, education, safety, belief, trust—"

He went on, "Start in your household first...open your doors to your kids and their friends; open your heart to them, because some of them might not have a father."

LeMarcus Branch, cousin of Harris and former gang affiliate, spoke up saying that understanding kids is the only way to save

them from the dead-end life of gangs.

"You've got to feel their pain. These kids out here are hurt," said Branch.

"I was hurt, I was mad, I was angry at everybody. I know, because I was one of them, but I am here to tell you that you can get over your hurt," and to parents, "Know what they're going through, what they're thinking."

Sitting nearby was Nicola Spears, a single-mother of 16-year-old son, Adolpha. Quietly, she told me that in the last six months, three of her family members have been killed in gang-

related incidents.

"I'm praying my son will stay away from gangs," Spears said.

Spears grew up in Oregon with many positive influences; an education at a Catholic school, a religious mother, and a father, who though in prison, had a major impact on his kids, telling them "education is a must."

She said there is nothing out there for youth seeking alternatives.

"Kids want out, but there's no where for them to go," she explained. Spears said she waited two years before she finally found a mentorship for her son.

Many voiced thoughts on how to end gang violence among youth, but most emphasized a similar solution:

"Give your kids time and atten-

tion and your kids will love you back," Harris said.

Even Portland's toughest gang members are shielding a true outcry for help, so parents don't be afraid to walk up to your own kid and tell them, "Hey, I see you. And pull up your pants," said Harris, humorously.

The local community is invited to join the next Restore the Village meeting on Saturday, May 28. The location has yet to be announced.

Restore the Village is a rolling series of community forums across Multnomah County where concerned citizens, neighbors, parents and young people come together to openly discuss their reactions to violence in their community and work together to find solutions.



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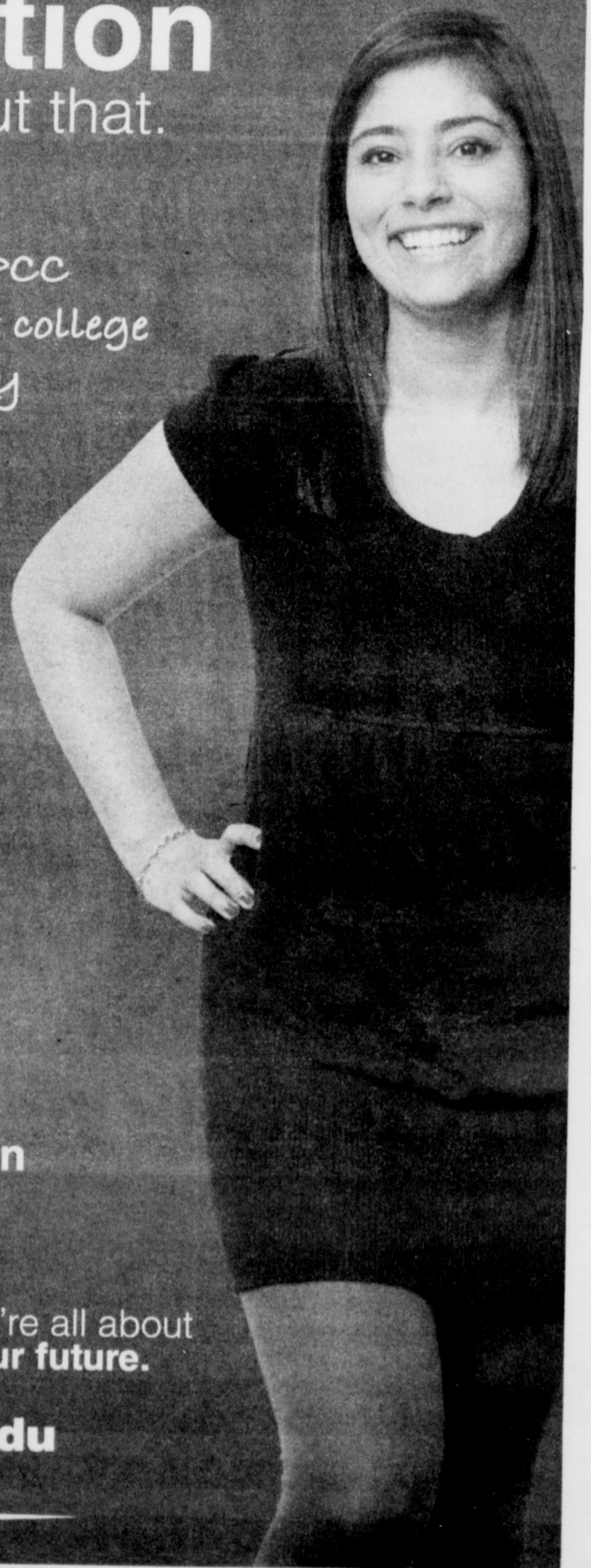
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