

Putting At-Risk Kids on Path to Non Violence

Youth mentor speaks from experience

BY DANNY PETERSON
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Dontae Blake, 43, is an ex-gang member from northeast Portland trying to reconcile his past by connecting younger gang members to nature in an effort to prevent them from going down the same path he once walked down.

Blake has been working for over two years with a non-profit organization whose aim is to decrease community violence by doing outreach for at-risk youth and creating pathways to education, careers, mentorship and community service. He takes kids on nature excursions that include whitewater rafting, mountaineering, wildlife viewing, and hiking trails in the central Oregon area around Bend, through the program, Unify Portland, Living Free.

“I haven’t had a disappointed kid yet. It’s like watching a kid



PHOTO BY DANNY PETERSON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Dontae Blake speaks from experience as he works to reduce gang violence in the community through a program called “Unify Portland, Living Free.” A former gang member, he has turned his life around and now works with an organization creating outdoor excursions for at-risk kids, helping them develop skills and interests that lead to productive lives.

Portland area.

Blake started mentoring at-risk youth back in 2010 while attending Central Oregon Community College in Bend, using his own tuition money and food stamps to fund the excursions. When he came back to Portland after college, he started attending Community Peace Collaborative meetings held every other Friday at the North Portland Police Precinct, organized by the City of Portland’s Office of Youth Violence Prevention.

Formerly known as Portland’s Gang Task Force, the public forum changed its name in 2014 to Community Peace Collaborative. The meetings are designed to intervene and prevent youth violence in Multnomah County by building support networks for youth and families, according to the Office of Youth Violence Prevention website. Community members such as individuals, law enforcement, businesses, city bureaus, faith communities, and neighborhood coalitions have participated in the meetings.



Outdoor excursions in the central Oregon area around Bend provide mentoring and recreation opportunities for at-risk youth as part of the “Unify Portland, Living Free” program born through the Community Peace Collaborate, Portland’s anti gang effort.

at Christmas,” he said. “They just turn into kids, even active, young active gang members.”

Blake was one of hundreds of people taken off a gang designation list after the 20-year-old practice was phased out by the Portland Police Bureau in October.

Mentoring and recreation programs, which are Living

Free’s flagship services, were listed as two of the top strategies suggested by community leaders to reduce the gang problem in Portland, second only to jobs and job training, according to a Multnomah County Comprehensive Gang Assessment from 2014. The same report stated that there were around 133 gangs in the

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