

Acclaimed crime prevention program comes to city

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

Winston-Salem is the latest city looking to a nationally-praised youth anti-violence program to help motivate youngsters from low-income neighborhoods to address crime issues.

About 50 young people between the ages of 9 and 18 — mostly from the city's public housing neighborhoods — took part in a two-day conference over the weekend that introduced them to the Youth Crime Watch (YCW) program. The program aims to foster youth leadership while giving young people the opportunity to find solutions to combat crime and other issues in their communities.

"Most programs involve adults telling youth how to behave, but we wanted youth to take control," said Alvin Atkinson, deputy director of the Winston-Salem State University Center for Community Safety. "There has been some reduction in juvenile violence

here, and we have to continue that, and we have to get the youth to take control of their own situation."

The Center for Community Safety is bringing the Youth Crime Watch program to the city with the help of the Housing Authority of Winston-Salem, the Police Department and the city's Recreation and Parks Department.

The YCW program was born in Miami in the early 1970s and began to pop up in other cities by the 1980s. Here, organizers hope to set up six youth crime watches in various neighborhoods. In each community, the programs will be youth-led. Young people have already begun to list the problems that exist in their neighborhoods. Through regular meetings, they will develop ways to address those problems and eventually implement the remedies they come up with.

The kickoff conference was held on the campus of WSSU, where youth participants not only heard presenta-

tions from local police officers and learned the basic tenets of YCW, but also got a tour of the WSSU campus and even took in Saturday's football game that pitted the Rams against Virginia Union.

Pernell Mitchell, a sergeant in the Lake County, Fla., Police Department and a national trainer for Youth Crime Watch, was on hand to motivate participants about the program. Mitchell says YCW has made a tremendous impact in his neck of the woods.

"We have seen a big difference," he said. "And this program not only reduces crime; out of it we have gotten future leaders as well."

In between giving the youngsters an overview of the program, participants were also put in mock situations to gauge how they would respond. Atkinson believes that by working with young people, problems can be headed off before they even begin.

"We had some focus groups, and there were some youth who said that selling drugs was not a crime. We now have an opportunity to change that whole mind-set," he said.

Bill McClain, youth services coordinator for HAWS, said that crime is already down in public housing, thanks, in part, to the Police Department's



Winston-Salem State University students Lunday Talley and Lakisha Tharrington try to keep young conference participants busy during a break in the action last week.



Alvin Atkinson of the WSSU Center for Community Safety addresses the young people.

Race

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program that aims to help Hispanic parents take more of an active role in their children's education, said Hispanics believe in the American dream just like every other group.

"They want to succeed....They want access," she said.

A local rabbi rounded out the panel. Mark Strauss-Cohn, rabbi at Temple Emanuel, said that discussions about race must move beyond forums and discussion groups and into the mainstream in order for strides to be made.

Strauss-Cohn said education and a certain level of sensitivity are also needed. For example, the rabbi said several members of his synagogue have complained to him that their children feel out of place when school sports teams collectively pray before competi-

"Before a game there is a prayer circle, which is wonderful for those who believe in Jesus, but for those who don't, it is very difficult," he said.

Solutions offered to the problem of racial inequality were varied and plentiful. Barefield said Crossing 52 is building bridges each day through its activities, such as the monthly potluck dinners the group sponsors.

"When you eat, it breaks down barriers and you talk about things you don't normally talk about," she said.

Morris urged the audience to find at least one friend who is of a different race than themselves. Smith said racial relations won't improve until everyone's points of view are considered before actions are taken. She likened it to an engineer building a bridge who does soil analysis on only one side of the bridge and ignores the other side. As a result, the bridge buckles and collapses.



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