

MINUTES

**Juvenile Crime, Graffiti and Gang Violence Task Force
Town Hall/Public Meeting
Thursday, October 16, 2008
6 p.m. at Jefferson Elementary School
601 S. "J" Street
Harlingen, TX**

Mayor Boswell welcomed the audience members present and encouraged the public to offer their comments.

George McShan thanked Mayor Boswell for taking leadership in forming this task force and informed the audience as to how the task force came about.

Manuel Olivo, Principal of Jefferson Elementary, welcomed the audience members and the task force committee to Jefferson Elementary School. He showed them a video entitled, "An Oasis in the Middle of the Desert".

Chief Danny Castillo asked the audience members to fill in a questionnaire that would provide the task force with community input. The audience members were given time to fill in the questionnaire. He informed the audience members on the success of the Neighborhood Watch program and introduced Officer Saul Castillo.

Officer Saul Castillo addressed the audience members with regards to the Neighborhood Watch program. He informed them that very soon they would be setting up a Neighborhood Watch in their neighborhood. He advised that they would be having a Community Block Party on Saturday, October 25th at 6 p.m. at 700 W. Curtis.

George McShan thanked Gabe Gonzalez for all his assistance to the task force. He asked Chief Castillo to assist him with the open mic session.

Chief Danny Castillo encouraged the audience members to address the task force with their comments.

Alberto Rodriguez proceeded to translate into Spanish the comments of the task force thus far and he encouraged the audience to approach the mic with their comments.

1. **Emiliano Diaz Deleon** approached the mic with his comments. He is a former resident of Harlingen and cautioned the PD and the task force to not criminalize the young people in the community. When the PD saw young people 'hanging out' in the community, he asked for them not to automatically assume that they were gang members. He is conscious that the problem lies with the young men of the community. He felt that young men were the main ones responsible for gang activities and graffiti. He felt the PD should engage these young men in helping out the community. He created an

opportunity for young men each summer to engage in a conversation about their role in ending men's violence and what causes them as men, young men and young men of color to engage in violence against other young men and women. He didn't see any young people on the task force. He asked them to consider inviting a young person to sit on the task force to offer their advice to the task force. He felt that there weren't a lot of things for young people to do in Harlingen. He felt that they needed to create spaces that were youth friendly.

2. An unnamed audience member commended Mayor and Chief Castillo for getting the churches involved in this process. She suggested that they ask teachers, educators and youth if they wanted to get involved in the task force. She informed them that she had been displaced after Hurricane Dolly living in Houston for a short while. What she saw there was 'not a pretty sight' and she felt that Harlingen was headed in the right direction.
3. **Moses Mendoza** informed the committee that he was an ROTC instructor at Cardinal High School, being involved in education for about 14 years. He saw the advertisement in the paper and felt that they did have a problem with the youth. Most of the students including young women are very smart. When they are in a gang they have leadership with a chain of command, they are like 'soldiers' that go out. To them the gang is their family because it's all they have. The structure is not at home and that's why they go around and tag the buildings. They're smart and teachers need to keep them engaged. He mentioned they had 'community solutions' on their form and asked them what timeline they had to enforce the solutions. He felt they should get youth involved especially an ex-gang member to get inside information and get solutions from them. He has talked to them in school on a one-on-one basis, which is much different than when they talk to them in a group. 'Solutions' is what he is looking for. They needed to get the parental involvement. He felt they needed to educate parents bilingually with regards to 'what is a gang' and 'what can I do if my child is in a gang'. A lot of teachers don't know how to deal with gang members. They needed to educate their teachers. They have seminars all the time but they never have had a class to identify solutions to the gang problem. He agreed as the video showed, that this campus is really an "Oasis in the Dessert" setting a standard for the whole community. They should start with their little ones and give them a vision for when they get older.

Mayor Boswell stated that he allowed the committee to set their timeline aiming for December for them to come up with recommendations to the City Commission. He appreciated all the specific recommendations that Mr. Mendoza brought up.

4. **Martin Espinoza** addressed the task force advising that his church was just down the street in Los Vecinos. He wanted to share three things with them, 1. God, 2. Education, and 3. No Fear. First, they needed to keep God in all things. Second, they needed to keep family integration and lastly, they should have no fear in education. He is from Mexico having come here 20 years ago. He asked the parents to have 'No Fear'! He stated that going to a technical college could go a long way. He asked parents to have no fear in disciplining their children. They needed to teach their children how to handle

themselves in the community. He congratulated the task force and Mr. Olivo for their presentation.

George McShan introduced State District Judge Menton Murray to the audience members and thanked him for his participation in the task force. He introduced Orlando Penuelas to the audience.

5. **Orlando Penuelas** addressed the audience and stated that as a constituent he got involved in helping out the task force. He introduced Joshua Sosa and Richard Romero (ex gang members) who would be speaking on 'why kids' are doing what they're doing.
6. **Richard Romero** said that a lot of the times that kids are out there messing up and doing what they're doing is due to parent neglect. He didn't mean that those parents here tonight were doing that but maybe others in the community. Maybe it was when parents let their kids stay out past 12 midnight. "I know it sounds crazy, but it's true." "That's how I started out." He didn't have his father figure around and he started hanging out with his friends and eventually got involved with gangs. "I'm not proud about it." "It's a life of nothing but regrets." "I regret a lot of things and now I've changed my life around and I want to help the community as much as I can." "I want to give back to my people, this is my city." "I just want to let the parents know, don't neglect your kids." He said they should get them involved in school activities. "Even if it's just sitting down to talk to each other." Have them talk about problems to counselors or get them involved in football or volleyball. He has little cousins that their parents have them involved in sports. "It's not good to be in gangs." "A lot of the things that happen around here are from gangs, the graffiti, burglaries and assaults." "I was in a gang since 12 and I'm 19 now." "If I can change my life around, anybody in this community can do it." He got involved in a Christian Church that has helped him to change his life around. "If you get God back in your life and listen to his Word it will help you out." "You need to pray at night and give thanks every day for another day of life for anything, even a meal." "I went to CPS for 3 years because my mom couldn't handle me." "I went from selling drugs, a negative and turned it into a positive." "I couldn't see my family when I wanted, it's was nothing nice at all (CPS)." "It messes up your life." "It will help to have your parents in your life." "It makes my happy to go to church and see so much youth there praising God." "Parents, smell your kids fingers, smell their shirts (for paint or marijuana), just anything that will help you know what your kids doing." "Teach them that smoking marijuana and doing thing like that is a gateway to a life of crime." "I just wanted to share those thoughts today and I appreciate you'all listening to me."

The audience members applauded his comments.

7. **Joshua Sosa** said that he was in the same situation. "I would do a lot of drugs, a lot of things like that." "It ain't worth it." "All the kids that are out there messing up but it's easy to change your life." "I was going to jail, in and out, smoking weed." "It wasn't worth it." "I was in a gang." "Gangs say that they have your back, but they never do." "Just like me, they turned their back on me." "I was a bad mess up." "It was never worth it, your friends are never there." "When you're in jail, your parents aren't going to

write you or anything like that.” “The only people you’ll be seeing every day are the people in your cell.” “One day I went to church and my pastor called me up there and I started feeling something and started crying.” “The pastor asked me if I wanted to change my life and I said ‘yes’.” “I felt that God touched me and I fell to the floor for an hour and half.” “When I knocked out I saw two doves and I was in the God’s hands.” He stated that he goes to the Temple of the Lord and he’s proud that he hasn’t messed up since he started going to the church for about a month now. “Kids, just stay out of trouble.”

The audience applauded his comments.

George McShan thanked them for their comments and stated how there was goodness in everyone, especially ‘our youth’. He thanked Mr. Penuelas for bringing these two young men to the public meeting. “You young men, you need to make sure you have a support system—education.” “You need to have workforce skills.” He said if they don’t get a support system then they could revert back. That is non-negotiable, they need to work together.

8. **Sessia White** addressed the audience as Coach at Jefferson Elementary School. He sees the students about 45 minutes every day for recess, but feels that they need more than that. He felt that kids have a lot of energy. “The graffiti gives them a rush and they need to be playing basketball, flag football or kickball.” The Boys & Girls Club has a new teen center with a big screen TV with pool tables, a dance revolution machine and a skate park. “Following what Richard said, the students here need to see people like Richard coaching.” Jefferson is the only elementary school that does not have a basketball team registered at the Boy’s & Girls Club—and that bothers him. “We need coaches and people like Richard that will volunteer and say, ‘hey coach I need a group of students that wants to play basketball or flag football’.” He asked the audience to spread the word that Jefferson needs more support. When he was young, he and a group of about 15 or 20 would get together to play tackle football outside. Now he drives around and he doesn’t see anyone outside playing football or basketball. He used to play everyday outside. His parents would punish him by keeping him inside. Today, it’s like ‘you’re punished and don’t come back in until it’s dark.’ He has a lot of talented athletic students and they need help to register the flag football team.
9. An unnamed audience member stated she and her daughter do not live in this neighborhood and they were closer to Lamar School. “They have been victims of gang activity and graffiti.” She was really glad that they were having this meeting and that the task force was created. She was proud of everyone present and asked the task force members to continue on the road they were on. She had a question, “what can be done with abandoned homes?” Sometimes, this can be a safe haven for gang members. In her neighborhood there is an abandoned home near her home.

Mayor Boswell stated that was one of the specific issues the task force was looking at—abandoned homes. In fact, they had a bus tour last Friday where task force members went out in Harlingen and they got a list of addresses back to Mayor. He asked the audience members if they had an address to please give it to a task force member for inclusion on the list. They would

then prioritize the list and try to address this issue. “We can start chipping away at this one at a time.” This is one of the actions they were looking at.

The same audience member asked them to continue having the same type of meetings and getting the community involved. “Because this is really, really great.”

10. **David Aguilar** thanked the task force for their efforts. He believes that gang violence is a result of family issues. He appreciates what the task force was doing now. “As a parent, as a citizen, as a human being, I offer my hand to you to help out in whatever way I can.” He feels that everyone there had a big heart and wanted to help out in some way. “I want to be a part of the solution.” He thanked the task force for what they were doing.
11. **Leticia Contreras** asked if they had any juvenile probation officers involved in the gang task force?

Tom Hushen responded that Juvenile District Attorney Rene Garza, as well as the Judge of the Juvenile Court system were actively assisting them.

A task force member stated that Tommy Ramirez is the Chief Juvenile Probation Officer and has a member that sits there with them. He advised there were people that go out and are trained to recognize signs of gang activity. They then inform the court that this activity is going on. There is a lot more that needs to be done, but that requires funding. He asked her to approach the County and City Commissioners with those requests.

George McShan reported that the School District has hired two juvenile probation officers—one at Harlingen High School South and the other at the Harlingen High School Cardinal campus. Also, they received a grant from Cameron County and they will also be there this year as part of the team to address those issues.

12. **Nicole Villarreal** stated she was a student at Harlingen High South. “I think this is really great.” She stated that there were a lot of parties at night that don’t get raided and there’s nothing going on at all. She commented that the two drive thrus in Harlingen sometimes don’t ask for id’s and a lot of teenagers buy alcohol from them. Also, at the schools there are a lot of guys fighting in the restrooms.
13. **Kathy Schultz** (?) asked about the trash in the alleys and the graffiti around town. She bought paint at Wal-Mart one time and spent several days painting over the graffiti at a lot of the buildings by the Hand of Man building and on the post at Lincoln Street under the expressway. When she did that the graffiti didn’t reappear on those areas for another year. Also, the loud music irritated her and she felt that it deteriorated the quality of life. She wondered why people who live in the middle of the graffiti aren’t angry about it. She wanted to understand more about gangs, what motivates them. She wanted to see more information about what they were coming up with.
14. **Juan Garcia** thanked the task force for helping the students out. He lives right in the middle of the ‘whole thing’ at Filmore and “F” Street. The video showed the west wall

and he's at the north wall. He painted over the graffiti in that area as well. The other buildings with the grown grass, he's called the city 2/3 times and they don't seem to be doing anything about it. He thinks they should tear down the buildings and put liens on the properties. The city tried to get a hold of the owners, but they couldn't do anything about it. The response from the police department is 'what can I do about it, they're juveniles.' He wants his peace and quiet and has bad health. He lives in the center of the 'cancer'.

Kathy Schultz (?) added that with all technology the kids think it's exciting to have 'sub woofers' but when you're in your home relaxing it's not exciting. A while back she made a presentation to the City Commission on the 'cruising' happening on Harrison and Tyler. She counted all the cars that made a turn around at the Jack in the Box down to Walgreens on the east side of town; it was 499 cars in one hour. She knows that 'cruising' is allowed, but it's a quality of life issue.

Mayor Boswell wanted to recognize Kathy because when Hurricane Dolly hit, she made cookies and snacks and took them to the city workers filling sand bags. The audience applauded her efforts. He mentioned that they have two graffiti abatement officers; these are city staff that go out and take down graffiti. The last fiscal year they took down over 1,300 sites. Harlingen Proud has volunteers that go out and do that also. This is a specific item that they are trying to address. The Harlingen 100 Image Task Force working with Harlingen Proud is trying to address this issue. He asked that they report those sites (especially around schools) to the city. "We need to know that right away, so we can go out and take it down." He commented that they have an ordinance where they can declare a building as unsafe and tear it down. Again, he asked them to identify the sites that they needed to take down. He stated that the issue on grass has been tough this year because of the rain. He mentioned that if they didn't get any action from the appropriate department, then he asked them to call the Mayor's office.

Juan Garcia stated this particular building has been there for 4/5 years.

Mayor Boswell asked him to get with him after the meeting and give him the address for him to take care of that.

15. An individual approached the mic and thanked everyone, especially the officers, for the forum that they were having. In listening to everyone's comments this evening, he wanted to state on how the quality of life has changed from when he was younger. He says that the 'personal responsibility' of the homeowners or parents has changed. He grew up on Diaz Street in San Benito knowing all of their neighbors and their parents. Now, in his neighborhood he doesn't know the vast majority of his neighbors. When he was a kid and they wanted to do something that perhaps wasn't right, they used to have to hide to do that. This was because all the parents would look out for their kids and their neighbor's kids and would call his parents to let them know what was going on and so forth. He knows that these parents at the forum really care about their neighborhoods and the kids in the neighborhood. He asked them to overlook being judgmental of anyone that would call them to report the 'bad practices' of their kids.

Tom Hushen thanked everyone for coming out to the forum and for their ideas that were really great ideas. He wanted to address the issue of neighborhood graffiti and why people aren't in an uproar about reporting it. "It all deals with pride and ownership." He felt that city needs to find money to tear these houses down and then the neighbors would take pride in their neighborhoods. What those young gentlemen said really struck a cord in him. He used to be a D.A.R.E. officer at the school and they used to have parental courses. Back then there was no TV as a babysitter and they used to sit down with their parents. They needed to teach the parents that they must show family pride. Their ideas are great and the City does have some ideas that they will implement. He understood that it would take money and they would try to find those funds. All those ideas would be taken before the City Commission.

16. **Nicolas Cruz** asked how many people in attendance lived in this immediate area? He appreciated that people from other areas were there to support them, but he and his wife were wondering how many present were actually from this area. The problem is here and he felt that it's been on going since the 80's. He felt this forum needed to happen again and not just one time. He got involved with the 2nd Street and Jackson wall mural. At that time, John Clary started revitalizing the downtown area and this has been ongoing for a good 20 years. This is the outcome of 20 years (not last year's problem). A lot of the homes in this area aren't lived in by the actual owners. A lot of the people that used to live here have moved out and are now renting the homes. "It's great that the task force is addressing this issue now and it's unfortunate that it took this long." People do have fear especially at night. He's been 'hit' by graffiti and he knows that these kids are not bad at heart. He lives half a block from where the last shootout happen. There was always crime that happens here that no one hears about. He and his wife own a lot of properties and they try to keep up those properties. They needed to stop hinting that the problem only exists in the 'west side' because he never hears anyone mention the 'north side or other'. The actual kid that did the graffiti, when he told one of the gang members about it, this kid came to his home and apologized for doing that. He doesn't have the answers but he feels they should have the forum again.

Gabriel Gonzalez thanked everyone for their presence and gave out the phone number for Code Enforcement for them to report any graffiti or other code enforcement issues. The information was also given in Spanish.

George McShan thanked everyone for their attendance. He commented that this was the first Town Hall meeting and they were planning to have six other meetings. This was a great opportunity to change the culture and the community's perception. He asked them to be sure sign in and leave their information so they could continue to be involved.

Mayor Boswell also thanked everyone for their attendance and HCISD for their participation.