

MINUTES

**Juvenile Crime, Graffiti and Gang Violence Task Force
Town Hall/Public Meeting
Thursday, November 6, 2008
6 p.m. at Zavala Elementary School
1111 North "B" Street
Harlingen, TX**

Chief Castillo thanked everyone for their presence at the second public forum of the task force. He gave an overview of the task force and asked the audience members to provide their feedback. He introduced the task force members: Jim Solis, Commissioner Tom Hushen and Commissioner Larry Galbreath.

Jim Solis welcomed those present to the meeting. He was speaking to them as Co-chair of the committee and encouraged community input to help them resolve these issues. He asked them to pass this information on to anyone that perhaps was not present at the meeting. He asked those present to please share their concerns and any solutions they might have. He recognized and thanked Judge Menton Murray for being present and thanked Chief Castillo and his officers for all their work in the community.

Chief Castillo advised everyone present would be handed a questionnaire which would provide the task force with feedback. He asked them to take some time to fill in the questionnaire and opened the public meeting.

1. An unnamed audience member asked what has been done so far?

Chief Castillo responded that they have the graffiti and curfew ordinance to assist them in dealing with these issues. He had just gotten back from the courthouse where a Harlingen gang member was on trail for shooting a police officer. Immediately after that occurred, they formulated a five-man team and recognized Steve Mayer as leading this enforcement unit in applying a zero tolerance approach to any gang activity. He felt that law enforcement would not be the only solution to this problem. Something that they realized in having contact with these gang members was that some of them want to get out of the gang lifestyle. Now, that posed a different challenge. The task force is trying to involve the community to get the 'pulse' of the community. He stated the task force had a broad range of members to provide input. He stated they have taken initial steps. He felt it would take initiative from not only law enforcement but also allowing them to provide avenues to help these kids get out of the gang lifestyle. They've seen good results from the faith based community in helping these youths. He recognized Jo Menindez as a part of this initiative. Through his efforts, Mr. Menindez has over 50 kids that are now living in a positive way.

The same audience member commented that she understood how a single parent could face problems in controlling their kids because they were worried in just bringing food to the table. She thought they should help these single parents in dealing with their problem

kids. She felt it was different stages in the youth life where they could help the single parents and kids. She asked what could be done to educate these single parents in dealing with this problem.

Judge Menton Murray stated that her comments were correct. He is the Judge that determines what happens to those kids that make it all the way thru the system where charges are brought up against them. He stated there were a number of resources available to help parents. One of the problems they see occurring is when the parents or the person offended dropped the charges. If the charges get dropped then the next time that child goes to court it's as if they were in there for the first time. He felt the parents should give them (court) a chance to provide help to the children. If the parents are committed to helping their kids, then they should allow the justice system to go thru the process and allow them to get probation or counselors for their children. They deal with this all the time.

The same audience member asked Judge Murray, in his opinion, why the parents would drop the charges on their child?

Judge Menton Murray stated that perhaps they felt sorry for the child. Depending on the level of the offense, maybe they felt that the child by having contact with law enforcement that it would have gotten their attention. Did this teach them a lesson that will last a lifetime? Sometimes it does and sometimes is doesn't. But as far as them being able to provide some type of drug rehabilitation or even talking to a counselor that resource wasn't provided.

Commissioner Hushen stated the school district had a parental counsel over the weekend and they also had counselors available even over the weekends to assist the parents. He affirmed what the Chief had said with regards to 'what affects one area of the City may not be what affects another area of the City'. When they come to the Town Hall meetings they are trying to determine what problems are in this particular area. He felt that there were always problems that aren't being reported to the City. The task force needed to get that information from them to be able to assist this area and come up with ideas to help them. Some of the problems they have found out so far deal with abandoned buildings. Now with that information, they could approach the City and ask for a solution to that problem. He asked for their input.

2. **Gail Thomason** approached the podium and stated she was a retired public education teacher of 26 years. She taught at Coakley Junior High with the 'at risk' children. She felt the problem was the family unit—being the backbone of their society. She had parent conferences and these kids would talk to their parents 'like dogs'. She would have to reprimand the children. Parents are afraid of their children. They do not know how to discipline. This is not just a police problem. As a teacher, they felt that the school had to do parenting, morals, ethics, disciplining and maybe a little teaching. That was just 'pathetic'. They had a club called Coakley Proud that give kids a place. These kids weren't UIL'ers, athletes or national honor society members but they were Coakley Proud members. If the kids aren't allowed to feel validated then they are going to go out and do these bad things. You (task force) are right about educating the parents and you (Judge Murray) are right if you have parents covering for their kids then they don't get the help needed. There was a contest called the "Way to Happiness" that she was

involved with. It taught morals such as ‘do not steal, honor your parents, be competent, etc’ and it consisted of kids doing projects to implement these morals. These kids won first place in the nation. These kids considered ‘losers’ that nobody wanted—went out and won first place. They wrote books on Valley History. With the help of Verna Young, she started a similar class called “Leadership” at the High School. They went out and did anti-graffiti projects. To this day, when you drive by the football stadium you can see circles and squares from years ago (that were painted over graffiti) and these projects haven’t been touched by graffiti again. She could see neighborhoods hosting events with similar projects for kids to do. She asked them to have neighborhoods get sponsors and have these types of judging events where kids could get recognized. She works at Harlingen Family Dentistry and offered to have all their employees do the survey. She has always cared about kids; she has dedicated herself to children—especially those that aren’t wanted. She was there to help the task force if they wanted to have a similar type of contest.

Jim Solis thanked her for her comments.

3. **Caraciano Castaneda** approached the podium and commented that before he was involved in criminal activity, drugs and gangs. He was the way he was today because of the life that he lived. Such gang members murdered the mother of his children, the love of his soul. Even then he still continued to live the gang life because when that was the only thing he learned when he was young—living on the streets. But his life changed and God showed him a different direction. People have learned that this is not living. These young kids are learning this gang life because they have nowhere else to go and they do what other people around them are doing. We need to start educating these kids to live a different way. He commended Brother Menindez who was doing a great thing. He started out with 2 people and now he had 50 people. The education of a different way of living has helped him. He was going to the prisons and the county to teach them there was a ‘way out’ and that they can change. When the community and the church come together for these people, they will change. Like the Mayor said, ‘enough is enough’. He had to make that decision for himself. He’s 37 years old and it took him a long time to change. There’s some young kids right here and they were learning a different way of living because of one man helping them. They needed to come together as a community. They needed to build a place for these youths can come in and watch videos or have them taught to learn a different life. He’s seen some young people and has heard their stories of them helping gang members to change their life. This Brother doesn’t have a big place for the kids to meet. The church is coming together and they would have other activities to offer them. That was his proposal. They needed to build a place for them. Here is this community giving them a place to go to be educated to help them change. He should be at the Emergency Room right now because he had a stomach inflammation but he first wanted to come to the meeting and speak to them about what they have done.
4. **Jo Menindez** approached the podium and stated that he was the Brother that Caraciano Castaneda was referring to. He is one of the men that started reaching out to the kids. They have seen America change through one. If they go to the Bible they can see that one man can change things. The Lord told him that he would help make a difference in

the City of Harlingen. He needed the Task Force' help in changing the community. He has offered his help to the Task Force, to the Police Department and the School District to help them reducing gang activity. The Lord instructed him to move to the Valley. He grew up in the streets of Houston and he was a 'lowlife'. When his mom took him out of that life, raising 10 kids by herself. A Mexican lady giving her kids a different life. As they grew up, raised in the streets of Houston, this Mexican lady is the roughest lady you can meet. When he went out in the streets and came back home with a stolen stereo, then he would put him on his knees and discipline him. One day the Lord touched his life. He was hurting because he was fatherless and the Lord touched him at the age of 17. He thanked his mom for directing him in the right path. Her direction was given as discipline. Discipline is love as the Bible states. That is what they are teaching now. There were 2 gang members with him today. He had a dream and a calling from God. In 1996, he moved to the City of Harlingen from the Denver area where he used to make \$26 dollars an hour as a construction worker. The prophet told him he would be moving to where his mom was living—that being Harlingen. He moved to the Valley making minimum wage. He started walking forward on August 8th of this year at 2:34 a.m. in the morning—the Lord told him he was sending him kids that were hurting. He told his son about the dream. His son told him he was crazy that if he were to preach to these kids they would be laughed out. In one week, they reached out to one gang member. The following week, 12 come in and the following week they had 22. He has 50 attending in about a month and a half. God uses people to make a change. Somebody has to step up to the plate. These kids are not in the Boys and Girls club. These kids think they are too old (15-19 years old) to go there. He needed their help. If they say they really want a change, he promises and he will keep his word—'allow me to help you and there will be a change.' Give me some time with those kids and he will make a change. God can do anything. He has told the Chief of Police that he can help them. They need a building. He has 'humbled for these kids'. His wife and kids are backing him up. These kids are going through a lot. The only way to reach out to them is 'love'. That is what he's doing now. These kids are changing. An ex-gang member (one of the strongest) has made the biggest change and was here today as a "Soldier for Christ".

5. **Michael Yanez** approached the podium as the Brother stated he is the ex-gang member. It was hard for him to go to church. He laughed in the Brother's face but one day he went to the church. He had never gone to church and he felt the anointing. He started bursting into tears. That same day he felt something change within him. God has changed him. His attitude and his earring are gone. He helped other gang members to change their life. He is 17 years old now and started in the gang life when he was 15 years old. These kids listen to him because he has lived the gang life before. These kids go to Vernon and he has checked up on them to make sure they are staying out of the gang life. They call him their 'older brother' and helped them get out their gang life. When these kids come to church he wants to get to know them better. He used to do drugs when he was in 5th grade. That was the life that was around him all the time. He almost died. He has a purpose on this earth—to reach to the youth. He wanted to help them. People may look at him and say 'what, that guy help other kids?' But, yes he can help them. He has friends that are going to church who are hurting. He tries to help them when he himself is hurting but he prays for God's help with the hurt. God has changed

him. He shakes his friends hands (his ex-gang members) but now he has God's protection. The backs of their T-shirts read Ephesians 6:10—be strong in the Lord. Now he talks in a good manner to the people. When he was in a gang, all the people that he didn't like, he now likes them. God says 'love your enemy' and he tries to do that. He will listen to anyone that has a problem. A lot of people are amazed because God will use him to go to people. They are "Soldiers for Christ" and they walk in a group. They are all equal. Everybody is equal in God's eyes. He likes coming to church. He goes Friday, Saturday and Sunday to church. It helps him because before all weekend when he wasn't going to church he was just 'messing up.' Now he's out of trouble and everybody that he hangs out with are good and they are trying to change. People that are in jail, their friends don't go visit you or anything at all. Here at church, if you get in trouble, then your friends do go looking for you to help you.

Chief Castillo asked him what other things they could do to help them curb the problem of graffiti? What about education?

Michael Yanez stated he wasn't into graffiti but he knew a lot of people that were. These people would look for abandoned buildings like old houses to put graffiti on. Places that were abandoned and out of sight. He felt that if they got rid of the abandoned buildings then the graffiti would stop.

Chief Castillo stated that some of the more successful graffiti eradication programs were the ones that cover up the graffiti as quickly as possible. The City was working very hard in partnering with Harlingen Proud to do that. Some church organizations have also volunteered to assist. One of the stumbling blocks is the private property and getting permission from the owners. Now it is a requirement under ordinance to either remove it immediately yourself or if you don't, then the City will have the ability to go in and paint over it. More recently that is what they have been doing. Obviously this was an ongoing issue. They would have to be very persistent in this matter.

Dr. Susan Ritter stated that in the neighborhood they also had taggers. These kids needed an output. The harder that they work at covering up the graffiti then the more daring the kids will get in tagging. These kids want their name known across the country and that is why they target the rail boxcars. They think it's an art form.

6. **Loree Ward** stated that she was a kid and without offending anyone there she wanted to state that some people maybe wouldn't go to church. But if they came up with a building that these kids could go to without having an age limit like the Boys and Girls Club that would help them out. Maybe they could have people provide canvasses and have the kids do paintings that could be put up somewhere to exhibit or sell them. We (the kids) could give you pointers and tell you what we would like. These kids could even use those volunteering skills on job applications.
7. **Joseph Ward** (Loree's father) stated he was the son of a preacher. He went to church all his life and left home at 15 years old because he got tired of it. He then started to get into a lot of trouble. He's worked with his daughter and a lot of other kids. Most of

everything that he does is because of what he hears from the kids. He felt that was what the City should be doing. Go out to the kids and find out what would keep them out of the gangs. What do they want to do? If they said 'hey how about a concert in the park?' He said he could personally put together a concert in the park in less than a month with free bands playing. Some of that kind of stuff could lead to them going to church. But the really hard core kids you not going to get them going to church. You got to give them somewhere to go and then have the church kids get to them. He asked them to go to the high school and ask the kids what they would like to do? He's been putting on shows for years in Harlingen, but he's never 'made a dollar'. He gets the kids involved. It gives them a lot of pride. The kids feel like 'this is my show'. Get kids together and let them write a play about their lives and put it on stage for everyone to see. Everything that he was saying to them was things that he's heard from kids.

8. **Reverend Richard Duhamel** stated that as a chaplain he spoke with kids very frequently. Family is where they are lacking. Love in the family. Family does not spend the time to be with their kids. They work a lot of hours and don't spend the valuable time with the kids that they need. They need to go out and do things with their kids. Do not let their kids go out at night until all hours. Families that pray together, stay together. Brother Jo, I've been to his church—it's awesome. You want the truth let the others tell you. Those kids right there they spread the word and then they'll believe. Kids listen to each other. It's horrible today. Kids are lacking at home. He encourages kids to become strong to help them. He needs to teach the children from the time they are born. That never stops. He's very proud of his kids. Teach the kids right from wrong and show them love.
9. **Beatrice Cruz** approached the podium and stated that she works here at Zavala. She felt that everything that they were saying was great but sometimes they forget the little ones. She was big on preventive measure. She works at an elementary school and they need to target those kids now. Maybe they wouldn't see the result instantly, but they would see the results in future years. They have a large Spanish speaking community and sometimes they have to educate the parents on how to help their kids not be out on the streets. They should target the young kids because they have brothers and sisters that the gang life is all they know. They could instill good values in the young kids and then it would be harder to break those values as they get older.
10. An unnamed audience member stated they shouldn't forget that for some kids they just couldn't go into the home and change things there for them so they needed to help kids in other ways.
11. **Aurelio Torres** stated that ever since he heard the Mayor set up the Task Force, he's been meaning to come to the meetings but he's been very busy. He wanted to commend everyone for all his or her comments. He felt that everyone had made good points. He especially wanted to thank the Police Chief Danny Castillo in his bravery for sending out the memo to the religious community and asking for their involvement. He wanted to reiterate a comment from Hilary Clinton's book that is 'takes a village to raise a child'. He felt that Judge Murray couldn't do anything if they don't get the kids in time. He

asked them to coordinate their efforts. They should all come together, HCISD, the Police Department, the City and the community. They needed to advertise so that everyone could know where to get the programs. TSTC has had speakers come down and give excellent presentations. He understood that TSTC couldn't open their doors to everyone in Harlingen but KMBH has at times filmed the presentations and then run the programs for everyone to watch. That might be something to help the parents get the parental skills they need. He would like to see a partnership for all the religious groups. If you are a single mother, then those kids need a mentor. If they could use some of the HCISD facilities to teach the kids some type of skill or help them if they are struggling with school classes. His daughter was struggling with algebra and he had to pay for a tutor to help her out. It would have to be a coordinated effort and he applauded everyone for coming out today. He was hoping that the City of Harlingen would be able to use the resources of the HCISD and getting those advocates like Brother Jo that would show them love.

Chief Castillo introduced Chief Torres from the TSTC campus and thanked him for attending the meeting. He thanked everyone for their attendance and asked them to look in the newspaper for the upcoming Town Hall meetings. He asked those that received a questionnaire to please fill out the form and return it to them.

12. An unnamed audience member asked why they couldn't have once a month a 'Battle of the Bands' type event?

Chief Castillo asked them to attend the upcoming meetings and invite their friends.