

April 22, 2010

Right now is the time to help our children

by Peggy A. Russell, Special to the Tri-State Defender

One piece of good news that should be shared throughout our community is the fact that serious crime in Memphis is on the decline. Violent crime in Memphis is down 34.6 percent since 2006. The decrease in crime has been directly impacted by the implementation of the crime reduction plan, Operation Safe Community in 2006. Operation Safe Community is a call to action for law enforcement, local government, churches, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, media and most importantly the community.

“Ask First: Is It Good for the Children” is a vital question in every aspect of my position at the University of Memphis, School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy: Community Building and Neighborhood Action Center. In my role as an Operation Safe Community Liaison, I am working with many community leaders to build long term community-based support systems to address gang violence; youth intervention/prevention services; economic development and safer schools. I am constantly encouraged by the reduction in crime and by the many collaborations being forged across our city. The reality is that this year we have 12,000 less victims of crime than we had in 2006. However, we need continued citizen support and engagement in order to continue the drastic reduction in crime.

We currently have 52 young people under the age of 18 and approximately 507 inmates between the ages of 18 to 21 at the Shelby County Jail. According to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline Report (Children Defense Fund, 2007,) “there are 580,000 black males serving sentences in state or federal prison, while fewer than 40,000 black males earn a bachelor degree each year.”

Each year, ten of thousands of children and teens are sucked into the “Cradle to Prison” Pipeline. How do we stop it? We need caring adults to help youth develop a sense of pride, a sense of how to interact with others in our community and a value system to help them become the citizens we want to live with in Memphis. Extensive research has shown that youth who have adult mentors, whether a parent, teacher, coach, religious leader or other role model, have far greater likelihood of succeeding no matter their personal circumstances. Academic achievement, good decision-making skills, resistance to gang involvement and drugs, and aspirations for higher education are among the documented results. (Grizzlies Foundation, 2009.)

Do you want to help a student and make our community a safer place to live? Visit www.teamupmemphis.org or call 901-205-TEAM or email mentor@grizzlies.com to explore mentoring opportunities available at several local organizations such as **Memphis Athletic Ministries**, Street Ministries, Boys/Girls Club, the Exchange Club, Youth Villages, Families of Incarcerated and others. Or maybe you are interested in mentoring a young person who has been truant in school. If so, please contact the District Attorney's Anti-Truancy Mentoring Program by calling Harold Collins at 545-5900 or email mentor@scdag.com.

Here are some other ways you can get involved in reducing crime in our City: Cyberwatch, developed by MPD, sends citizens an email with reported incidents, sex offenders and outstanding arrest warrants daily. Additionally, users can report suspicious activity to the police. Sign up at: <https://kiosk.memphispolice.org/cyberwatch/>. CrimeStoppers offers cash for information about crimes. Citizens can now report a tip 3 ways: sending a text message, on the Web site or by calling 528-CASH. For more information, visit www.crimestopmem.org. Juvenile Court is looking for volunteers! Contact Pam Taylor at pam.taylor@shelbycountyttn.gov or call 901-405-8420. Memphis City Schools has established a truancy hotline, 416-8111 and encourages citizens of Memphis to call if you see school aged children not in school during school hours. Children will be picked up by school personnel, not the police, and taken to one of four Memphis City Schools Truancy Assessment Centers. Visit the Operation Safe Community Web site at www.operationsafecommunity.org or call 901-527-2600, ext. 3.

I encourage you to find a way to join forces with our efforts to reduce crime in Memphis. So often when I ask someone why he or she is not volunteering or mentoring, the response is a lack of time. Most people will say that they plan to do it “some day when they have more free time. I do understand time restraints and family obligations – I am a wife, mother of five, a Baptist minister and a part time college professor. Still, I find time to mentor and volunteer in efforts focused on improving the lives of young people because as Chilean poet, Gabriela Mistral, wrote: “We are guilty of many errors and many faults but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer “Tomorrow.” His name is “Today.”

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